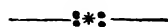


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THE PAINTED LATH

The Bonds, a sturdy, respectable working-class couple, have moved out of London to a new suburb in the south-west in the last years of the old century. Their daughter Jessica gets a good education which takes her to a post on a woman's magazine and then to a lawyer's office. In this story a charming and intelligent girl of four decades ago faces the problem of finding for herself, of coming to terms with a war which she scarcely understands and of distinguishing the false from the true in other people.

Books by Beatrice Keun Seymour

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BUT NOT FOR LOVE
MAIDS AND MISTRESSES
DAUGHTER TO PHILIP
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FROST AT MORNING
SUMMER OF LIFE
THE HAPPIER EDEN
THE UNQUIET FIELD
FOOL OF TIME
HAPPY EVER AFTER
RETURN JOURNEY
BUDS OF MAY
JOY AS IT FLIES
TUMBLER HOUSE
FAMILY GROUP
THE CHILDREN GROW UP
THE SECOND MRS. CONFORD
THE WINE IS POURED . . .
THE PAINTED LATH

THE PAINTED LATH

by

BEATRICE KEAN SEYMOUR



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**To
CONNIE
with my love
and
gratitude**

BOOK ONE

CHAPTER ONE

JESSICA, whose story this is, was the second child of Sidney and Emma Bond, self-respecting working-class folk who came from stock as firmly wedded to the soil as Sidney and Emma were to the metropolis, to which they had migrated in their mid-teens. They were married within a year of their first meeting in eighteen-eighty-nine.

Emma was nearly three years older than her husband and was a little self-conscious about it, especially as Sid had only reached his majority some three months before their marriage. But Sid's parents made it perfectly clear that they considered this a very good thing, maintaining that he would do much better with a wife old enough to have acquired 'a little sense', which was rather hard on Sid, who had plenty of good sense of his own. He neither drank nor smoked to excess, had worked hard at his chosen craft and had had for the past three years a good steady job with a building concern of standing. He was aware, however, that his parents had never quite forgiven him for leaving home at seventeen; that they considered no young man with sense would have deserted the countryside and the satisfactions (even the hazards) of farming to learn a trade and live in the metropolis. And Emma knew that they also considered him too free with his money. Money should be saved against a rainy day—a philosophy which moved Sid to good-humoured impatience. However, they approved of Emma and counted it to his wavering credit that he had picked a sensible young woman, and nice-looking into the bargain, instead of some empty-headed little chit who knew nothing about anything.

It was Sid's easy-going attitude to life and his inherent dislike of looking ahead which explained Emma's role of business

manager in the home. He lived stubbornly and happily in the immediate present and, with excellent health and a good trade in his hands, saw no reason why he should worry unduly about Tomorrow. Emma, on the contrary, thought a good deal about Tomorrow, and said that you never knew what it might bring. Sid might have a serious illness, or there might be a slump in the building trade or another strike. She had never forgotten the year of strikes in which they had met, nor the brief one which had occurred soon after their marriage in Sid's own trade, when as a non-unionist ('a blackleg') he had to be escorted to his bus every evening by a policeman! Much better have joined the union and be done with it, a greatly worried Emma had advised. Just a fuss over nothing! . . . About all these matters Sid would have liked to argue, had he not learned that argument, with Emma was a singularly unrewarding exercise, since she would neatly snap off the head of any you started. Argument, in fact, for Emma, was first cousin to a quarrel; in both, the parties tended to get excited and to raise their voices, and these things, he knew, genuinely distressed her. Not that Sid had any desire to argue about much—certainly not as to who should shoulder the business of budgeting for their modest household; he was only too glad to have it taken off his hands. So, to Emma's worst forebodings he would submit mildly that, at any rate, it was a nice bright day at the moment.

It was Jessica who was one day to scotch even that attractive argument for not rushing with open arms to meet trouble.

"Oh," she said, "but for mother *It is the bright day that brings forth the adder, And that craves wary walking,*" to which her father rejoined, "You got that out of your books, my girl."

"Certainly," she had agreed, with a smile. "Shakespeare—*Julius Caesar.*"

"Go on with you, letting me down like that," Sid protested, but, brought up in the country, he did not deny the truth of the quotation. These old writers knew a thing or two.

The fact that their first child was a girl had been so much a matter of regret to them both that they were more pleased than

might otherwise have been the case when Emma found she would have another child by the time the baby was two months short of her second birthday. Nevertheless, this prospect disrupted their scheme of things to the extent of causing them to wonder if a flat at the top of a tall house off the Edgware Road was the best place in which to bring up two children, the first of whom was already showing signs of delicacy. Though this fact undoubtedly worried them it also a little annoyed them.

"She don't get it from *my* side of the family," Sid asserted, to which Emma replied, with no less assurance though with better grammar, "I'm sure she doesn't get it from mine!"

They were both quite absurdly vain about their good health, and to have a delicate child severely chastened their pride. When presently the doctor suggested that the baby, whom they had named Ethel, and called 'Ethie', might do better out of the 'used-up' air of London, they were both moved to defend the town as warmly as they had been to defend their respective titles to unblemished stock. "Used-up air," indeed!—and within a stone's throw of Hyde Park! However, since there was nothing less to their taste than having a delicate child, they presently agreed to follow the medical advice, and this explained why Jessica Mary made her appearance on this earthly scene in a ground-floor flat towards the top of one of the steep streets that ran up from a fast-growing suburb to a wide stretch of London common, in the spring of 'ninety-four.

Emma did not care very much for the change and complained of the hilly approach to the Common, up which, at least once a day, she needed to push a pram containing her two little daughters. But Sid offered the opinion that the house was, after all, almost on the brow of the hill and that when she'd got rid of the extra bit of weight she'd been complaining about since Jessica's arrival, she'd not think anything of the 'bit of a slope'. Anyway, it was a nice enough flat and just right for the youngsters, what with the Common so close at hand and the strip of garden, even if they did have to share it with the middle-aged childless couple in the flat above, who clearly regarded 't as a nuisance that *they* should have to share it with *them*! Things might be a lot worse!

With this sentiment Emma agreed, for to her they might no only be so—but at any moment. She had no faith in the stability of their situation and often thought with relief of her hundred pounds in the post office, the savings of her pre-marriage working days, but not without wishing that she could add to them. Nevertheless, she did not 'take' to the flat, and began to urge upon Sid the advantage of moving a little farther out, into a small house with a garden of their own in which the children might be left in safety to sleep or play, without disapproving glances from other people.

"Rubbish!" said Sid. "The Browns don't disapprove. They're just jealous. Anyone would like to have a kid like Jess."

Annoyed though she was by this distinction Sid made between his daughters, Emma did not fail to notice that he had managed very neatly to side-track her argument for another move, to which indeed he continued to turn a very deaf ear; for he felt they were very well off as they were and the last thing he wanted was to be uprooted again. Moreover, having recovered from his disappointment over the mistake in the sex of his second child (for which, in some odd fashion, Emma felt he blamed her!) he was quite enchanted with the pretty little creature, usually so happy, seldom in tears, and always so delighted to see him when he came home from work. He'd have favoured her, anyway—even if she hadn't been so pretty, with her red-gold hair curling and waving round her delicately-tinted little face, and her air of suggesting that he was the centre of her universe—because she refrained from attracting to herself most of the minor ailments from which her elder sister so frequently suffered. And though Emma considered it very wrong to have favourites among your children (and quite unaware that she favoured Ethie for the very reason that her father did not) she was mollified by his pleasure in the child whose sex he had so much resented. It seemed now that he had forgotten all about wanting a son, and frequently said that two daughters were enough for his pocket. But Emma had not, though she was reluctant to embark upon the venture in case another disappointment awaited her. Three girls would

not be at all what she wanted, and as to one thing she was determined—she would move them all into that small house she wanted before she made what she thought of as ‘the last effort’.

It was a shock, therefore, when she discovered that this plan was not going to work out, that by the autumn Jessie would not only achieve her fourth birthday but would cease to be the baby. Sid was distinctly perturbed, not so much because of the prospect of an addition to his family, as because he realised that Emma would give him no peace until she had hounded them all out of the flat into this house she’d been hankering after for so long, though goodness alone knew where it was to be found! The business of the hill and the pram, it seemed to him, no longer held good as an argument against their present abode, for the children were now quite capable of toddling the short distance up to the Common. The pram, indeed, had been relegated to the background of their existence and Sid was not too pleased that this was soon to be altered, for Em was very emphatic that she could not again start ‘all that business of the pram and the hill’. In that quiet, decisive way of hers, which always a little defeated Sid, she maintained that they must really try to find a house while she was in what she called ‘a fit state’ to wrestle with a move; and certainly it would be very unwise, she considered, to wait until she had a baby on her hands as well as the two girls. They alone would be more than sufficient.

Sid gave in, keeping to himself his conviction that Em could make short work of a ‘move’ in any circumstances, for he had not forgotten how quickly she had reduced chaos to order when they had moved out from town. They’d looked, in a few hours, as if they’d lived in the flat all their married life. His respect for Emma’s organising ability was considerable, for he himself had none of it. Nevertheless, he hated the idea of another ‘upset’, still convinced they were very well where they were for a time, or would be but for this newly-heralded addition to the family, which he regarded glumly as something of a lottery.

However, since even another move was to be preferred to

Em's continual proddings, he decided it would be as well to do something towards finding what he called the 'mystical' house. For Sid was an unconscious user of the "fine derangement of epitaphs" long before Jessica, with *The Rivals* in her English syllabus, was enlivening the home circle with Mrs. Malaprop and her remarks. Having no slightest idea of where to start the hunt, he made inquiries of his work-mates, and was told there was some building going on at a place called Fairhill, a new suburb some four miles south of his present situation. Small houses, but good class. Well-built, too . . . a nice job. Ought to be just what he wanted. Worth looking at, anyway.

"Fairhill?" said Emma. She'd never heard of the place. She hoped it was south of the Thames—she didn't fancy the north, somehow. Reassured on this point, she conceded, in her careful fashion, which always a little riled Sid, that at least there could be no harm in his going over to see what the houses were like, but impressed upon him that no house would be any good unless it was near a station, or unless there were buses or trams at hand (as she didn't suppose there would be!), for he wouldn't want to start the day with a long walk in all weathers. (She spoke as if no variety of weather would make it anything but a discomfort.) She hoped it wouldn't prove 'too isolated', she didn't want to go into the wilds—Emma's name not only for the countryside upon which she had so early turned her back, but for the 'outer suburbs'.

So, the next afternoon, it being a Saturday and fine, Sid got out his cycle and started off for Fairhill. He had spent a few minutes with a map and did not anticipate any difficulty in finding it. Even if the trip yielded nothing he'd enjoy the ride, he thought, for the late March day was unexpectedly bright and sunny. Nevertheless, he was feeling a little disgruntled. For wasn't it just *like* Em! Keeps on at you for weeks for not doing anything about finding the house she wanted (though goodness knows you were comfortable and happy enough where you were!), and then directly you made a move, she must start up with her 'ifs' and 'buts' and generally throw a lot of cold water about. Very damping it was, and no mistake. Then

when she had finished telling him to be careful on the journey (she spoke as if he were bound for Timbuctoo) and not to 'take risks', she'd thought of something else. On no account must he 'commit' himself to anything until she had seen it. "Don't *sign* anything, Sid, whatever you do!" As if he didn't know better than that! Besides, a woman spent more time in a house than a man did and ought to have the last word on that subject, anyway. And if this afternoon it occurred to him that Emma had the last word on a good many other subjects too, he did not hold it against her. Em was no 'nagger', but she was a bit of a 'worry-guts'—you couldn't say different. When he chaffed her about it she'd say, "Well, *someone* has to look ahead," and she did wish he wouldn't use that vulgar expression. Em was always very quiet-like—never raised her voice, however riled she was with you. Dressed quiet, too—always as neat as a bandbox, whatever job she was at. But Em was more than a cut above him—he'd always allowed that. Got it from her mother, he supposed. . . . Quite a dame she'd been, in her alpaca dress and white lace collar. Ladylike—that was the word for both of them, he thought, riding on happily through the bright afternoon, unaware that the pretty child who sat so often on his knee and seemed to regard him as the delight of her existence would one day pour scorn upon this shabby adjective of which he was so fond. "Ladylike!" she would say. "Who wants to be that? You're either a lady or not!"

The afternoon was warm; spring was in the air and soon Sid began to lose his slight sense of grievance and to enjoy his ride. When he'd found this house Em wanted he must take the old bike out again occasionally. Since his marriage it had had but few airings, owing to Em's confirmed belief that cycles should not be ridden through London traffic, and to the state into which she had worked herself on the few occasions when he had hardened his heart against this ruling. Em could always see all the unpleasant things that might happen to you if you ventured beyond your own front door, and if you were half an hour later than usual in reaching home from work she had you already dead and buried and herself tramping off with her

fatherless children to the workhouse. A great crosser of bridges was Em—of bridges not built or ever likely to be. Too imaginative by half. But a good wife. No man could ask for a better.

At this point in his reflections he realised that he was well on his way, that the road along which he was now riding (according to his reading of the map) should be Windmill Road, with Fairhill Common on his right-hand and the deep cutting of the South Western Railway on his left. At this point he saw the old windmill itself standing back on a strip of grass, its base encased with a fencing tarred like the mill itself. Well, thought Sid, of all the things! . . . must once have stood in fields, he supposed, saluting it in passing. That would tickle Em's fancy! So far so good. After crossing two bisecting roads he should find himself in Fairhill Road and approaching his goal.

He liked the look of Fairhill Road as much as he had liked the approach to it, but all the houses in it were of the kind 'those agent chaps' called 'desirable residences'—lived in, he supposed, by doctors, solicitors, City gents and the like. Detached, standing well back from the tree-lined road in well-tended front gardens, gay with the first spring flowers, they gave him a sense of being in the wrong suburb. They'd been standing there, it was obvious, for a good many years and, by their very presence, seemed to rebuke the idea of anything as new and crude as a building estate. For a considerable stretch the road ran on without side turnings, possible, anyway, only on the right since, clearly, the railway cutting ran behind the houses on the left though at a considerably lower level. With their long gardens, he thought, the people living in them would scarcely know the trains were passing.

Gradually the character of the houses changed, became less imposing, semi-detached, then paired, with side entrances, then terraced. A fair jumble of styles, he thought, but not objecting to this. It made for variety, broke up the long line of the road. And to his professional eye they all looked good, with a settled, well-cared-for appearance; but all the same they were not what

he was looking for. Not a single shop to be seen, either, since turning along by the Common, and no sign anywhere of new building. A wild-goose chase, he wondered? Then he became aware of two things—first that he had put his hand automatically upon his brake, which meant that the road, though almost imperceptibly, had begun to descend, and second, that he was approaching the first side road, which he saw was called The Avenue; but though he looked hopefully down it, no sign of building was to be seen. It looked indeed as established as the Fairhill Road. The turning below it offered the same aspect, but approaching the next he saw what he was looking for—a builder's board straggling the corner. With a hasty glance behind him, he crossed the road, noticing as he did so that it appeared now to be almost on the level, though looking ahead he saw that the descent was real enough. Beyond it, in the near distance, he could see tall chimneys, and the smoky pall that told him he was still not far from London. Fairhill indeed seemed to be something that had miraculously escaped the net of the fowler; but Sid summed up his reflections with the one word 'Queer', and at this point noticed that the road declined so reasonably that even Em, he thought, could hardly complain that it was a hill, though you never knew what Em would say about anything, bless her!

Dismounting, he stood and read the builder's announcement. Fairhill Estate (Walsingham Road) it was headed, and informed the public that well-built conveniently-planned houses were in course of erection, to be let at reasonable rents. Inquiries should be made at the office on the estate or of the builders at an address which Sid wrote down in the notebook he always carried in a vest-pocket. This done, he stood looking about him, at the open space so soon to disappear for ever and already littered with the appurtenances of building, and at the backs and garden fences of houses below, which had obviously been standing for some years. Odd that this small section of the estate should have been left undeveloped for so long, he thought, as he walked his cycle along the unmade-up Walsingham Road, noting the handful of houses on the opposite side of it, fronted by a rough asphalt pavement and stopping,

like the pavement, as abruptly as they began, as if the builder had got tired of them. Sid's professional eye roamed over them. Tall, shallow, approached by red-brick paths ending in a short flight of steps, with narrow front doors, they seemed to him rather a poor effort. They'd be the better, too, for a coat of paint. But they all had clean curtains at the windows and the silly steps were clean, too, and the iron gates firmly closed, giving an impression of inhabitants very properly minding their own business. Well, he'd go and have a look at those being built farther along which would soon be keeping them company.

Within a few yards he found the office—a wooden hut with one window and a door, the handle of which he turned. Locked. Might have known it, he thought, seeing it was Saturday—the day when house-hunters might be expected. Through the window he saw that the hut contained a table and chair. On the former reposed a neatly folded newspaper, a bottle of ink and a couple of pens, and above it was pinned what was clearly a map of the estate. Over the back of the chair was thrown an overcoat, so obviously, Sid argued, the owner would be soon returning. Gone out to get a cup of tea, most likely. Well, meantime he might, as well go and see what there was to be seen, he decided, taking out his pipe and lighting it in the shelter of the hut. No use asking a lot of questions before he'd seen what was being offered. Wheeling his cycle along the unmade-up road, he set off.

He was considerably disappointed to find the work less forward than he had hoped. Not that he couldn't form a fair idea of 'the job'—he saw enough every day of his life of building at all stages to make sure of that, but it didn't look as if any of the houses would be ready in time to suit Em. However, avoiding the thin trickle of other folk, like-minded, he moved along until at the slight curve of the road he came to a pair of houses partially roofed, and stood quietly surveying them. No jumble of styles here, anyway. Save for a choice of flat windows or bay, the exteriors were the spit and image of one another. But to his professional eye they looked promising. Propping up his cycle beneath the

one he thought looked the more advanced, he went inside.

He spent an interesting ten minutes, and at the end of them decided that the chap who'd told him the houses were a good job was right. They were, in fact, exactly what the announcement board said they were—well-built and conveniently planned. With so much elbow-room Em and he wouldn't know themselves. Downstairs, two fair-sized rooms, one of them with a door opening on to a wide strip of garden, a kitchen and small scullery, the latter with a copper, and above, two double bedrooms and a smaller one—and a bathroom which, though small, would be both a novelty and a luxury. Sid was so delighted with the house that he feared the rent, for all the board had said 'reasonable', would put it beyond his means. He had a good steady job, he reflected, been with the same firm for years and never been out of work for a day. All the same, five people wanted some keeping. . . . Well, best go and see if that chap at the office had come back from his tea.

He had, and proved both helpful and chatty, which pleased Sid, who was himself a friendly creature and liked a bit of a 'jawbation'—too much so, he was often told by Emma, who believed in keeping herself to herself. However, Sid was soon in possession of the facts he required and was of the opinion that the rent asked was not only very reasonable, but, he dared to think, within his capacity to pay. "Good references required, of course," he was told. "Don't suppose you'd have any difficulty there—present rent book would do for one, o' course. . . . The 'ouses are good value—they are, straight. Nice piece o' ground, too. If you're fond o' gardening you could make it look a fair treat . . ."

Sid thought so too, but he remembered that he had not yet asked the date when the house he had looked at was expected to be finished.

"Two to three months' time, if the weather holds," he was told, at which Sid's spirits fell considerably, for this agreed with his own estimate. He could see that he might have trouble with Em over this, but if he could get her to come and see the house he thought she would agree that it was worth waiting for. So he inquired about the shops and heard that five minutes'

walk straight on down the Fairhill Road would bring him to a whole block of shops—butter, baker, grocer, post office, stationery, papers and confectionery and an off-licence—the whole boiling, in fact. And twenty minutes' walk away there was the old High Street with a fine lot of shops and a Complete Furnishing Store that sold pretty nearly everything. Fair'ill station was about fifteen minutes' walk—straight on to the bottom of Fair'ill Road and a few yards along the Lane. And, of course, there was the junction at the other side of the Common, but that meant walking, for there were no buses. "The folk at the Common end of Fair'ill 'ud be dead set against them, anyway. But they'll come in time, o' course . . ."

The essentials thus disposed of and no further applicants appearing, Sid offered his tobacco pouch and, the 'jambation' taking a more general tone, Sid asked presently how it was that this part of the estate had been left so long undeveloped.

"Well, it was started, you know, but the builder went broke, poor chap. Built those few 'ouses 'cross the way at the top—not much to look at but not at all bad inside, though a bit on the large side. Stood empty no end o' time. People just didn't seem to fancy 'em. 'Course they had a goodish lot to choose from just then—'ouses going up all over the estate. . . . Know this part at all, sir?"

Sid said he hadn't got as far out as this before. He had no idea it was so open.

"I remember, as a boy, w'en it was good as country. All this 'ere part, o' course, was the grounds of the big 'ouse at the top of the 'ill—Fair'ill House they called it. I remember it well, but not, as you might say, in its 'eyday. Done for, o' course, from the day they cut the railway through the Common and part of its grounds—long before I was born or thought of. I remember my father pointing out the old windmill to me, as a kid, and telling me that before the railway came it had been standing in the middle o' the Common. Quite a walk now to get to the other side of it—and that's cut in 'alf, too, by the Brighton and South Coast line. When the old ladies at the 'ouse died the place was all sold up—the big 'ouse came down and

smaller ones went up. Couldn't 'ave lasted for ever, o' course. Too near London. The old 'ouse in the Lane went the same way."

"The Lane? Is that the road at the bottom of Fair'ill?"

"That's it—runs through from Becking to the old 'Igh Street of Fair'ill. Rows of streets of small 'ouses there now—none of 'em a patch on Fair'ill, if you asks me. My word, though, you'd never think it was a pretty country lane w'en I was a lad at school!"

"Times change," Sid offered. "More folk in the world."

"You've said it. Got to live somew'ere, o' course. All the same, London's a kind of creepin' monster swallering up everything. Afore you're my age, young man, it'll 'ave swallowed up, this side alone, another thirty miles—easy! You mark my words!"

Emma listened to what Sid had to say about Fairhill and the houses there without interrupting him. Sid knew about houses, and if he said these were 'a good job' then they were. But at the end of his report, she said exactly what he had expected—that it was a pity there would be such a long wait before the houses were ready. However, she agreed that it would be as well if she went over to look at them, because, after all, you never knew what might happen; and perhaps if they decided to take one of the houses the builders might be able to hurry things up on it. To this Sid agreed, though only by a miracle, he thought, could one of the two he had seen be finished by the time Em wanted to move in. However, happy and relieved that she had not decided there and then that it would be wiser not to think any more of Fairhill, but begin to look elsewhere, he kept this thought to himself; and merely addressed himself to the question of what to do with the children during their absence. It was too far to take them along, he said, thinking of the walk that would face them from the point at which they would leave the bus. He had not been expansive about this since it was not one which Em, in the ordinary course, would need to take. But the children presented no problem to Emma, who said that their neighbours upstairs would give an eye to them.

"They'll be so glad to hear we're thinking of moving," Emma said, "that they'll do anything to speed us on our way. They mean, I'm sure, to move down whenever we go. If it's fine they'll be sitting in the garden, as usual, and the children can stay out there too. And if it isn't fine, well, we shan't be going, of course."

So these things were left. The day, however, proved bright and sunny, their neighbours were as obliging as Emma had thought they would be, and after an early lunch they set off, with no more trouble from the children than a shrill, "Me, too!" from Jessica, who had never before seen both her parents about to desert the nest and was rent with the appalling conviction that she was being basely abandoned. However, having been adjured by Ethie not to be 'a baby' and told that *she* didn't mind being left, Jess decided to put a brave face upon it and to believe, as her mother said, that they would be 'back in time for tea.'

The fine afternoon and their good luck with their bus Sid took as good omens, as also the fact that Emma made no adverse comment upon the walk after leaving it; indeed she commented very favourably upon the neighbourhood and did not reprove him for saying 'classy' when he meant 'good class'. The house, too, met with her approval, but not the unmade-up road. (What that would cost the family in shoe leather!) It was clear, however, that her pleasure in the house by no means reconciled her to the long wait before it would be finished, and would it be wise, she asked, to move into so new a house, before it was properly dry, with Ethie so delicate? If the weather held until the roof was on, Sid told her, there'd be no risk—the house was sound enough, dry as a bone. But he could see that she was not inclined to bank on the good behaviour of the English climate. They ought not to 'commit' themselves yet awhile. Better wait and see. Nor was her attitude to be altered by his statement that once the roofs were on there'd most likely be a run on the houses, and if they wanted to get one of the two upon which roofing had begun they ought to nobble it at once. There was nothing they could do to-day, with the office shut, she said, but her suggestion that

they should walk down and see what 'those shops' were like he took as another good omen, and they set off.

It was so they came upon Thelma Road and the little house at the top end of it which had a 'To Let' notice in the window. But for Emma's bump of locality they would never, that afternoon, have set eyes upon it. But after rejoicing Sid's heart by approving of the shops, she had suggested on the way back that if they took a turning on the left and then kept right they must come out again in the Fairhill Road, a little below Walsingham. It wouldn't be out of their way and they'd see a little more of the neighbourhood.

So they found themselves nearly at the top of the road which ran parallel with Fairhill, the name of which they did not know then, and to a little group of some half-dozen houses, one of them empty and showing in the downstairs window a 'To Let' sign.

It was Emma who pushed open the little iron gate of Number Six and peered in at the downstairs window, Emma who pushed back the flap of the letter-box and glued her eyes to the aperture, while Sid stood on the pavement and sent his knowledgeable glances over the exterior. He noted the good condition of the roof, of the paint on the door and windows, the care with which the privet hedge had been trimmed, the patch of grass cut, the absence of weeds in the well-rolled gravel path beneath the window and the unbroken red-tiled path to the front door. Whoever had lived in the house could only very recently have left it and had taken good care of it whilst there. A little box of a house, the plan of which took shape in his mind, and—as he was soon to find—quite accurately, as he stood there gazing at its exterior.

"Been standing about ten or twelve years I'd say," he remarked to Emma, who said only, "I wish we could look over it, Sid!"

"You can, if you want," he told her. He had sharper eyes than Emma, and, too, was less excited, and so had seen the neat note in the corner of the 'To Let' bill: 'Key at No. 12'. "'Course, being Sunday, they mayn't want to be bothered," he added.

"Well, we can but try," Emma said. "They can't eat us. It looks as if it might be just what we want. I mean, it's all ready, by the look of it, to walk into."

Sid considered this a somewhat too optimistic conclusion from the available evidence—the view they had of the front room, obviously newly re-decorated, and Em's similar conclusion over what she called 'the hall', at which she had squinted through the letter-box. However, he walked along to Number Twelve, the last house in the short block on that side of the road—the back gardens of the houses of the two side roads running into it from Fairhill making further building impossible. He noticed that on the opposite side, however, the houses ran in a straight monotonous line to the bottom of the road, which appeared to be shut in by a fence with a tall hedge behind it. That should make it quiet at night, he thought—a matter of some importance to one who must rise betimes.

His knock at the door of Number Twelve was promptly answered by a young woman who smiled upon him and made no bones about its being Sunday when asked if he might trouble her for the key. "I'll come along with you," she said, and as they went she explained that the house belonged to her uncle, who with her aunt had gone to live in the country. They had only moved out on the Friday.

"So we are the first-comers?" Sid asked.

"Yes, indeed. We hadn't expected anyone so soon. My uncle has left the letting to my father, who is out, unfortunately, this afternoon. He thinks my uncle should sell, but uncle likes what he calls 'a bit of property'."

As they went through the house Sid was gratified to see how accurate his idea of its plan had been, but the rooms, for all they were disposed as he had conjectured, were larger and pleasanter than he had expected and all in first-class order and newly decorated. The back sitting-room, opening on to the little garden, he found especially pleasant, with a creeper-clad trellis built out from it to give a shady sitting-out place, and beyond it a square of neatly cut grass bisected by a well-rolled gravel path and flanked by narrow flower-beds showing an edging of daffodils and narcissi and neatly pruned rose bushes.

A well-grown climbing rose covered the front of the trellis, and the fence at the bottom of the garden was hidden by the thick growth of a small-leaved plant the countryman in Sid recognised as jasmine, and in the left-hand corner a slender sycamore stood in its bright spring livery.

"My uncle was fond of his garden," said their escort, "and told us to be sure and let the house to someone who would look after it. Someone who lived in the neighbourhood came to see it before my uncle left, but he said he was no gardener and wanted to keep chickens. . . . So he was unlucky," she added, laughing, whereupon Emma said, "My husband is very fond of gardening, but at present we have to share our garden, which does make a difference, especially if you have children. We have two little girls," she added as they walked back to the house.

"No objection to youngsters, I 'ope?" asked Sid, and Emma blushed for that mislaid aspirate.

"None whatever," said the girl, locking the garden door behind them. "I've two young brothers—ten and twelve."

They went upstairs and found, as Sid expected, three bedrooms, two double and a single. The front room, taking in the width of the front sitting-room and the front passage (Emma's 'hall'), was, however, an unexpectedly pleasant room, with two good sash windows, a green-tiled fireplace and a full-length built-in cupboard. The 'lay-out' was as he had been sure it would be; nonetheless, box though it was, it was a good one, in which you'd find plenty of room to turn round. The only surprise for Sid was the water-tank set, neatly encased in wood, in a recess on the landing beneath a small window which, he noticed, was open an inch at the top. This was an idea of which he warmly approved, for if there was one thing as a householder he detested it was climbing into the roof whenever there was cistern trouble. He saw that the arrangement won Emma's approval too, but for quite another reason. Already the tank, with the window behind it that would open top and bottom and so keep the house fresh, had become an ornamental addition to the house, for it was just the right height to carry with excellent effect a bowl of flowers, a pot of fern. . . .

Said their cicerone, as they went downstairs, "I'll leave you,

shall I, to talk it over together? You don't need to make up your minds at once. As you're the first-comers I'm sure my father would not let to anyone else until he hears from you—say by Wednesday morning? The name is Greenham, Thomas Greenham, and you know our number. I am instructed to ask for two references and a week's rent in advance. The rent is twelve-and-six a week, inclusive of rates. Would that be all right for you?"

"Quite all right," said Sid, "no difficulty at all," and Emma added, "I'm sure it's exactly what we want," but still Sid did not say outright that he would decide upon it. What he did say was, "Well, thank you, miss, you've been very kind, I'm sure," and to Em, "We ought to be getting along, my dear."

"Did you walk across the Common?" Miss Greenham asked. "You should have come down to Fairhill by train from the junction—it's only ten minutes' walk from the station, and there's a very frequent service of trains. I think Mrs. Bond looks very tired . . . as if she needed a cup of tea." She looked at her watch, then said, "I'll get you one—it won't take five minutes," and before they could protest (which Emma, at least, would have done very half-heartedly) she had hurried away.

Sid unlocked the door of the sitting-room fronting the garden and suggested that they sat down on the plank seat beneath the trellis. "A bit 'ard," he said, but they'd been on their feet long enough. "Specially you, Em . . ." However, although Emma was glad to sit down she was by no means so fatigued as to have lost interest in the house. It seemed too good to be true—a house all ready to walk into! And so airy and light, so nicely decorated, and in such a pleasant neighbourhood!

The sound of footsteps and giggles was now heard and, getting up, Sid saw two small boys at the door of the room, each carrying a chair. Almost overcome by their amusement they came in and said, "Good afternoon," and on their heels came their sister, carrying a tea-tray. As Sid and Emma sat down in the chairs, not without a sigh of satisfaction, Miss Greenham put the tray on Emma's lap.

"Just leave everything," she said, "when you've finished—the boys can collect it later on. By the way, I ought to have said that you would find this a very quiet corner. The road's a cul-de-sac—Job's Nursery Grounds run along for some distance between us and the Lane. And at this corner of the road we've all lived here so long it's almost, so my mother says, like a village." She looked at her watch, said, "I must fly. . . . I'm training as a nurse and have to be on duty at five-thirty at the hospital on the far side of the Common . . ." She smiled and hurried away, taking the boys with her.

"What a nice, thoughtful young woman!" said Emma, as she handed Sid his cup of tea, to which he replied, "She's got eyes in her head, anyway. Knows you've been traipsing about enough. . . . But if you think you're going to roam around here any more you're mistaken. 'Ome we're going directly we've swallowed this tea, and we can make up our minds as we go."

But he saw that Emma's mind was already made up. And indeed he could find no fault with the house save that it wasn't the house in Walsingham Road upon which he had set his heart, and that it had no bathroom or hot water supply. The former objection he kept to himself and, as to the other, it was, of course, true, as Emma said, that they'd managed to keep themselves clean all their lives, so far, without either. And, she added, talking of cleanliness (though they weren't, Sid thought, only of the pleasure of having a bathroom!), there would be a good deal less dirt to fuss with here than there would be in Walsingham Road, with all that building going on and the unmade up road. And quieter, too. . . . With that Nursery ground shutting off one end of the road they'd be almost private, especially at their end.

"Until the Nursery ground," said Sid, "goes the way of all that's gone before. Then they'll build on right through to the Lane, I shouldn't wonder. Lot of privacy there'll be then!"

Emma, surprised to find Sid looking ahead for once, was of the opinion that he looked too far.

"That won't be for years," she said.

Sid did not dispute this. For he saw that they would go to

live in the house in Thelma Road because it was two shillings a week cheaper than the one in Walsingham. For two shillings a week was five pounds a year, and he knew of no argument which would prevail, with Em, against that fact.

"Funny name for a road," he remarked as they sat in the train. "Thelma! I wonder where they got *that* from?"

Emma, who had no idea, said nothing and Sid had to wait twelve years for an answer. And it was Jessica who gave it him. Someone, she said, must have been reading Marie Corelli. One of her novels had *Thelma* as its title.

"Oh?" said Sid. "When was that?"

"Ages ago. I'll look it up for you the next time I go to the Library," she said obligingly.

"Eighteen-eighty-seven," she subsequently announced, and after a few seconds devoted to mental arithmetic, her father said, "There you are, Em! I said when I first saw it that it had been standing between ten and twelve years. . . . Not far out I wasn't, neither! Eighteen-ninety-eight—eighteen-eighty-seven. Eleven years!"

"What on earth are you talking about?" asked Emma.

"It don't matter, my dear," Sid told her.

But Jessica said, "Very good. Go to the top of the class, Dad!"

They had moved to Number Six, Thelma Road a fortnight after they had seen it. And once he had recovered from his disappointment Sid conceded that the house was 'right enough'. Which was just as well, since he so much disliked moving 'upsets', and also because, had he but known it, he was to live there for the rest of his life.

Six months after the move his third and last child—the desired son—was born. Much time and consideration was spent upon the question of his name and ultimately a decision was made in favour of Andrew. For no particular reason save that they both liked it. They then immediately proceeded to call him 'Andy', under the impression that they were shortening it, as when they converted Ethel into 'Ethie'. Jessica's pretty name was the only one of the three which was actually lopped

of a syllable, and sometimes (and chiefly by her father) of two, when she was addressed as 'Jess'.

"Really," said Emma one day, "I don't know why we took so much trouble to choose nice names for the children, for we never use them."

"Teacher does," announced Jessica, who by this time had been at school for about a month. "She says Jessica is a very pretty name, but that Jess is a horse's name."

Indignation bereft her mother of words, but Sid laughed heartily. "Not so far wrong, either," he commented, "but the word teacher wanted was 'mare'."

"Is a 'mare' a horse?" asked Jessica.

"Oh yes. Haven't you ever heard me say 'the grey mare's the better horse'?"

"Yes, only—there weren't any horses."

At this remark Sid began to laugh again, whereupon Emma said, "Your father was thinking of horses down at the farm, I expect," which had the effect of deflecting the conversation, for Jessica had never been to the farm and very much wanted to go. Emma added, "I think, if you are very good, the next time your father goes to see your grandparents he might take you. We shall have to see."

CHAPTER TWO

IT was in the January of nineteen-hundred-and-two that Jessica made the acquaintance of Drury Hamilton—an occasion which was destined to set the pattern of her whole life.

The morning was very cold, and for the first time since she had started to go to school, some seven months earlier, she was walking there alone, Ethie having succumbed to her first cold of the winter. Emma had been very doubtful about letting the child make the journey without a companion, but she loved school and had pleaded so hard to be allowed to go that Emma

had given way, reflecting that if Jessica had to be kept from school every time her sister was ailing she would learn very little, to say nothing of trouble with the school inspector. Besides, though St. Anne's Church School was the best part of half-an-hour's walk for such small legs, it was made along quiet residential roads with little traffic and no main crossing.

All the same, Emma spent a worried morning, reflecting that it was an inconvenience that none of the children of her immediate neighbours went to St. Anne's, but attended the Board School in the Lane. Although she knew some of them considered her choice of St. Anne's just 'swank', she also knew that the charge was quite inaccurate. Em's careful mind would not have assented to the weekly cost of sixpence for each of her daughters' education had she not, reconnoitring, looked with the utmost disfavour upon the school in the Lane, from which she had watched children positively in rags and with naked feet emerging from the playground. Rough, dirty, noisy 'gutter urchins', crossing and re-crossing the traffic-infested Lane. Nothing, she had there and then decided, would induce her to send her children to such a school in such a neighbourhood, quite apart from the long roundabout walk they would have to get there, ending in the crossing of the busy Lane itself. She had no idea, she told Sid, that the Lane was such a 'slummy' place, and was thankful for the Nursery ground which separated Thelma Road from it. She even had a few regrets, despite her pride in her little house, that she had not allowed Sid to have his way over the alternative in Walsingham Road, which nowhere impinged upon the Lane; but this she did not mention.

Unaware of these matters, Jessica walked happily along, singing softly to herself after her fashion. It was the first time she had been out alone and she was enjoying the experience, despite the very cold morning. She walked quickly because even at this age she could never dawdle and always walked as one with a purpose. She had the quiet road to herself, which was exciting because it was just as if there was nobody else in the world but she—Jessica Mary Bond, going happily to school, clutching the note of excuse which her mother had written accounting for Ethie's absence, and with the sixpence

which had to be taken each Monday morning as her week's fee tucked inside the woollen glove on her left hand.

Suddenly, running out from the road across the way which sloped down into the one along which she was walking, came a group of shouting boys, kicking a football. She saw that they were 'big' boys, and what her mother would call 'rough' and Ethie describe scornfully as '*Board School boys*'. But to Jessica they were just boys with a football, and she stood still for a moment watching them, fascinated by the way in which they kicked the ball from one to the other. Now the biggest boy had the ball at his feet, but he did not pass it on. She saw that he was looking across at her, and suddenly there was a yell of laughter, as if he had said something very funny, and then the ball was coming straight at her. The next moment all the breath seemed to have left her body, and with her little arms pressed against her assaulted stomach she stood doubled up in agony, the tears running entirely without volition down her face. The shock of this brutal introduction to pain rendered her completely oblivious to the roar of laughter, the yells of "Goal" and "Smack in the bread-basket!" and other witticisms which acclaimed the prowess of the hero of this pretty incident as he came running across the road to retrieve his ball.

It was at this moment that Drury Hamilton, who had turned out of Thelma Road and had seen, too late, what was afoot, now rushed forward and grabbed the young miscreant by the collar, just as he was turning to kick the ball back to his admiring pals. Drury was tall and well-grown, and though the boy was obviously younger, this fact did not deter his captor from inflicting condign punishment upon his up-ended person. When he finally jerked him upright he did not relax his hold and promptly kicked down the foot raised to kick him.

"If I catch you at this game again," he said, "I'll march you off to your headmaster and see that you get a jolly good caning in addition to a good lamming from me. You're a disgrace even to your Board School, from which we don't expect much."

"I'll see you gits paid for this, see if I don't," yelled the captive, infuriated by the knowledge that his companions in

villainy, who had scattered when retribution appeared upon the scene, now stood at a respectful distance enjoying his triumph. "I know where you live, Mr. Cocky 'Amilton. I shall pay you for this—you see if 'e don't!"

My dear him along," said Drury calmly, "and now clear off.

"Seek twice before you play another of your dirty tricks on And thirl half your age and size. And here's something you'd a small gemmer—small girls deliberately whacked in the better re a football often *die*. So you may be hanged yet—stomach it to anyone. Now hook it—and take your ball with and no!

you! he spoke he took a powerful kick at the ball in the wrong

Aion and laughed as the boy, with an ugly gesture, went dir it. With any luck, he'll be late, thought Drury, and get a good caning.

This little interlude had given Jessica time to recover somewhat. Indeed, she had been so surprised by Drury's appearance upon the scene and by his behaviour that she had almost forgotten she could hardly breathe and that her outraged tummy was still complaining, though less unbearably, and she had stopped feeling sick. She was, moreover, very interested and somewhat alarmed to hear what Drury had said about dying.

When he took her hand and asked how she felt, she said, rather gulpily, that she was "Better now, thank you," and wondered why he held her wrist as he did, pressing it slightly between his thumb and finger.

"Where do you live?" he asked. "In Thelma Road? Could you walk back, do you think?"

"Oh yes . . . but I must go to school."

"I think you should go home after such a horrid biff. Which school do you go to?"

"St. Anne's."

"That's a long way to walk. Won't you let me take you home?"

"I'd rather go to school, please," she said, and then, "Oh, dear, I've lost my sixpence and crumpled up the note for teacher."

"So you have, but never mind. I expect she's quite used to

crumpled-up notes. Let's see if we can find the sixpence."

The blue-grey eyes, still bright from the involuntary tears of pain scarcely dry upon her cheeks, misted over again at the thought of her loss.

"I *must* find it," she said. "It's what mummy has to pay every Monday."

Light dawned upon Drury. He put his hand in his pocket and produced another sixpence. "I'll keep it, shall I, until you reach school, if you really won't go home instead."

She nodded assent on both these points. "Hold my hand, then. I'll walk with you—it's on my way."

This wasn't strictly true. He'd be making a very considerable detour and, however hard he sprinted after depositing Jessica at her school, would most certainly arrive late at his own, unless he happened to get a bus at the bottom of the hill. But such a consideration never deterred your true knight-errant, which was Drury Hamilton at fifteen. He lived in Fairhill Road, on the brow of the hill, and his direct route lay straight on across the Common; but he had come out of his way to deliver a prescription for his father, meaning to cut back into the usual route. He had started in good time to allow for this errand, but this encounter had eaten up the margin, and a further detour, via The Avenue and St. Anne's Hill, would about put the lid on it. But it couldn't be helped.

"Do you always walk alone to school?" he asked, as they went along, at Jessica's pace. In for a penny, in for a pound.

"No, with Ethie. Only she's got a cold and has to stay in bed. Mummy wanted me to stay at home too."

"Ethie's your sister, is she? You like school?"

"Oh yes. Only, you see, I haven't been out all by myself before. Do *you* go to school?"

"Rather! To Fairhill Grammar School."

"Is it a long way from here?"

"Not for my long legs."

Silence for a few yards, then, "You didn't mean that about dying, did you?"

"Oh no—at least I didn't think *you* would die, but I thought it quite a good thing to let that lout think that *you* might."

"But are you *sure* I won't?"

"Quite sure."

"But . . . but if I *did*, would he really be hanged?"

"No, unfortunately—too young. But if he doesn't mend his ways it's what he'll come to some day."

"He was a horrid boy, wasn't he?"

"Very horrid. So were his pals."

They were nearing the school now, for there was the imposing church of St. Anne, standing well back from the road fronting an expanse of grass enclosed by tall railings. To get to it, Jessica confided to Drury, you had to walk up the road at its side, where there was a gate. She knew this because there were mornings when she and the other children went to church instead of doing lessons. She liked that because the organ played and they all had to sing, and she liked singing, she told her escort, and further, "Mummy *likes* us to go to the church, but daddy doesn't."

(An observant young person, thought Drury; and this was truer than her age would have led him to suppose.) For Sid came of ardent nonconformist stock and maintained that the youngsters, church school or no, went there to learn, not to be taken to church. Emma, however, had been brought up by her mother as a member of the Established Church and had gone every Sunday of her life as a child to the village church. On meeting Sidney she had 'changed' to please him, at least to the extent of going to 'chapel' with him on Sunday evenings. She was, however, never really at home in the bleaker atmosphere of nonconformity, which had grown considerably bleaker for her since the death of Spurgeon, under whom they had sat together during his last years at the Metropolitan Tabernacle.

When they reached the school, set back behind a narrow coping of the same rough grey stone as the building itself, the bell in its little tower was clanging noisily from side to side, and a huddle of small boys and girls were pressing through the doorway.

"Well, you see, you're not late after all," Drury said. "You've got the note for teacher, have you? And here's your sixpence. No pain now? Be sure and tell your mother if you

have when you get home. Before you go, don't you think you might tell me your name?"

"Jessica . . . Jessica Bond," she said, shy again, and her voice so low he had to stoop to hear what it said.

"Well, that's a very pretty name. Good-bye, Jessica. You must hurry. The bell is stopping."

She smiled up at him and ran off across the short courtyard, and without looking back mingled with the group at the door and vanished from his sight, whereupon he strode off, breaking into a run as he heard the sound of a bus coming along the High Street and due to stop at the corner. But he could catch it, he knew, easily enough, for it would have to delay to take on the trace horse before climbing East Hill. He was in luck, he congratulated himself, for the bus would take him to within a few yards of the school and he'd save a few lines, anyway.

All the same, he got a hundred. His excuse—the errand for his father—availed him nothing. He was urbanely told that he should have allowed for that and started earlier, to which Drury, with equal urbanity, replied, "Yes, sir."

Emma sighed with relief when Jessica arrived home for her midday meal. She had spent a worried morning, a prey to every kind of misgiving, convinced that she should have kept the child at home, inspector or no inspector. But here she was, safe and sound; none of the frightful things which had plagued her imagination all the morning had happened. Everything was as usual—Jessica at the table, pushing most of her meat, as usual, on to the edge of her plate, Andy in his high chair, amiable and smiling and eating his dinner with his customary readiness.

"Did you find your way all right?" Emma asked Jessica.

Jessica said, "Oh, yes . . . it was easy."

"And nobody spoke to you?"

"A nice boy did. A big boy." She hesitated because, although he had asked her name, he had not told her his, and she had not liked to ask. But the nasty boy who had kicked the football at her had known it and had called him by it, if only she could remember it.

"Why did he speak to you?"

Emma's note was sharp.

"Well, you see, Mummy, a nasty boy kicked a football at me."

"Kicked a *football* at you?" Emma's voice was edged with alarm. "Were you hurt?"

"Yes, I was . . . my tummy hurt a lot and I nearly fell down. And the nice big boy came and shook the nasty one and told him that little girls who get kicked by footballs sometimes die."

"*Jessie!*"

All Emma's fears came rushing back at her, but Jessica, now well embarked upon her story, was not to be side-tracked.

"But I think he only said it to frighten the nasty boy—he said he hadn't meant that *I* would die . . . but it *did* hurt, Mummy. All my breath went. The nice boy wanted to bring me back home but I said I wanted to go to school, and it wasn't hurting so much then. So he walked all the way with me. I had dropped the sixpence, so he gave me one of his own."

"And you don't know his name?"

"I'll remember it soon . . . the nasty boy called him by it . . ."

"Well, eat up your dinner and don't leave all the meat. Are you sure you haven't got a pain?"

"No, I haven't," said Jessica, gravely considering the matter.

"No . . . I'm sure I haven't."

"But you're not eating your dinner. Aren't you hungry?"

"Not . . . not *meat* hungry."

Emma sighed. Jessica was never 'meat hungry'.

"You're sure it isn't because you've got a pain?"

Jessie, a little tired of the subject, merely nodded. Removing her plate, Emma said, "There's a pudding you'll like. Ground rice and figs."

The appetite with which Jessica dispatched the plentiful helping Emma gave her of this dish removed her worst misgivings. But a football kicked into the stomach of a child of seven!—and deliberately aimed, it seemed. And she might have fallen down, her head might have struck the kerb and she'd

have been killed. For one awful moment she saw the child stretched out, dead, upon the pavement, saw the gathering crowd, heard the sound of the bell of the approaching ambulance. . . . She'd better take her to school this afternoon. Ethie was safe in bed, at least she hoped she was. Anyway, she was in *bed*. She'd wheel Andy along in his pram. Well wrapped up he would come to no harm out in so late a part of the winter day. But Jessica said she wasn't afraid—she'd walked home all alone.

"I wish you could remember the name of the boy who came to your rescue, Jessie. I'd like to thank him and return his sixpence."

"The Board School rat . . . that's what the nice boy called him!—*he* knew who he was. He said, 'My dad'll pay you for this . . . I know where you live, Mr. . . .'" A pause, then, "'Mr. Cocky 'Amilton'. . . Yes, that was it—Mr. Cocky 'Amilton.'"

"It must be *Hamilton*—that kind of boy would be sure to drop his aitches. But 'cocky' isn't a Christian name, Jessie, it's just a rude expression."

"Oh yes, of course—I've heard daddy say it."

Emma made a little grimace.

"He *shouldn't* say it. It's a very common expression. 'Stuck-up' would do equally well. Perhaps the boy might be Dr. Hamilton's son?"

"Does he go to the Grammar School?"

"I don't know. But I know that Dr. Hamilton has two sons. We don't have Dr. Hamilton. Well, perhaps some day we may meet your rescuer and you can introduce me."

"I daresay Ethie knows him. She knows everybody."

Emma said, "Well now, come over to the fire and take your things off. I must see if you have any bruises."

There were none, but Emma's uneasiness persisted. Goodness knows, she thought, what a blow like that may result in! "I think," she said, "that we ought to go to Dr. Martin, just in case."

"Oh, no, Mummy," said Jessica, who did not like visits to the doctor. "Do *hurry*, please, or I shall be late!"

"There's plenty of time. I'll walk to the corner of Dalebank Road with you. After that you'll be safe from the Board School boys. It won't take more than ten minutes if you hurry. Andy will be all right in his chair for that little while, won't you, my son?" she asked. He smiled seraphically, and his mother, torn between the knowledge that he should be put into his cot at once for his afternoon sleep and her anxiety for her little daughter, said, "You'll be safe enough, Jessie, won't you, once you get into The Avenue?"

Secretly relieved at this arrangement, Jessica nevertheless refrained from any expression of her state. She was to have a horror of 'young toughs' for many years to come, but nobody was ever allowed to become aware of it. At the 'safe' corner she trotted off alone, having been given strict orders to wait when she came out of school until her mother arrived. The last thing Emma wanted was to 'traipse all that way,' but she wouldn't have a moment's peace if Jessie, with the dark coming on, was walking home alone.

Back in the house, she went into the sitting-room to make sure that no harm had come to Andy in his tall chair during her ten minutes' absence. None had, and she took him out of his chair, carried him upstairs and put him into his cot and then went along to collect Ethie's lunch tray, and also to sit at the foot of her bed and say, "Do you know the names of Dr. Hamilton's boys, Ethie?"

"Oh, yes. Swanky ones, they've got. One of them's called Youan—I don't know how you spell it. He's at the school where the boys wear long coats and mustard stockings—you only see him about in holiday times. The other one's a bit younger—he goes to Fairhill Grammar. He's called Drury. He comes to the Reeds' at Number Two sometimes, to leave medicine—the Reeds have his father. Why do you want to know?"

"Drury—as I suppose it was—came to Jessie's assistance this morning when some of those Board School roughs hit her in the stomach with a football."

Ethie laughed merrily at this, and her mother said severely, "There's nothing to laugh at. Your sister might have been

killed. Luckily she doesn't seem to be hurt, for which we must thank God."

Ethie went on laughing. Other people's misfortunes generally amused her and this one of her sister's seemed to her particularly mirth-making. Her mother said with some sharpness, "Do you feel well enough to get up for an hour or two this afternoon?"

"Why?"

"There's no 'why' about it," her mother said, with some show of annoyance. "Either you do or you don't. And if you do I should like you to dress and come downstairs while I go to meet Jessie. You can keep an eye on Andy."

Ethie said, "I don't feel like getting up. My throat hurts." She sighed and lay back upon her pillows. Her mother picked up her dinner-tray and stood, holding it, looking down upon her.

"Then you'll have to stay in bed in an empty house, which you won't like at all. And I shall have to take Andy with me."

"Why can't he be up here?"

"Because this room's too cold. I must say you're looking much better. You've eaten all your dinner and I've not heard you coughing much this morning."

To this Ethie vouchsafed no reply, but she turned her dark gaze reproachfully upon her mother, who without further comment went out of the room. As she went downstairs she was followed by sounds of determined coughing from the bedroom and, though she smiled, she felt exasperated. Really, with Ethie you never knew! She made the most of everything she had wrong with her and seemed to enjoy this business of being unwell. Jessie went to the other extreme and could never be relied upon to stay quietly in bed, not even when she'd had that touch of bronchitis last winter. And you'd never hear from *her* of falls or playground encounters. If she hadn't asked her whether or not anyone had spoken to her as she'd walked alone to school she'd never have mentioned the incident. But the child couldn't say 'No' without telling a lie, which it had been impressed upon the children they must never

do—without, she was afraid, much effect upon Ethie, whose frequent ‘fibs’ seriously worried her mother. Moreover, if this nasty incident had befallen *her* there would have been nothing in the least ‘amusing’ about it. She would have extracted the last ounce of value out of it. But Jessie made light of the cowardly act and had protested strongly against the suggestion of being taken to a doctor.

No two sisters, she thought, could ever have been so dissimilar—a fact which was to declare itself even more plainly as the years moved on. But this afternoon, as she walked downstairs, frowning at the determined coughing from the bedroom, Emma did not look so far ahead. Her thoughts narrowed to the conclusion that Ethie was ‘putting it on’ because she didn’t want to get up, and that it was annoying to have to push Andy all that way in his pram, just because all her neighbours had been so inconsiderate as not to send their children to St. Anne’s. However, it was out of the question to leave him, so in due course he was warmly dressed for the street, and sat crowing with pleasure as she wheeled him along the quiet roads, meeting hardly a soul until she was within five minutes’ walk of the school. And, oddly enough, this deserted state of the streets filled her with as much dismay as, earlier, it had done to think of them infested with ‘gutter urchins’ with death-dealing footballs to kick at small girls.

Year of grace nineteen-hundred-and-two though it was, for Emma, as Sid not infrequently said, it might as well be the Dark Ages, with the streets full of thugs, thieves and cut-throats. She would not have taken you seriously had you told her that the home was a far more dangerous place, that more people were fatally injured there than in the streets. But some six months later she had reason to ponder the thought that this might actually be so.

It was towards the end of March that Drury Hamilton, making his usual late start for school, encountered a tall, very harassed looking woman, with large dark eyes, ushering in at the gate a small girl around whose head and throat was swathed a towel which, beneath her chin, was soaked with

blood. Interest and concern blended in the glance he turned upon the gory sight, not horror, for Drury Hamilton did not suffer the usual qualms at the sight of blood. And he had instantly recognised the little victim. As he held back the gate, he said, "Hello, Jessica! In the wars again?"

The child did not speak, but the blue-grey eyes, which showed signs of recent tears, sent him a glance of recognition, as Emma asked, "Is the surgery open? We're rather early, I'm afraid, but my little girl has had a very bad accident."

"So I see," said Drury. "Come right in. I'll go back and tell my father."

Though it was barely ten minutes to nine there were already several people in the waiting-room, none of whom, Drury decided, looked as if his or her case was urgent. Emma and Jessica sat down amid their murmurs of interested concern and dismay at the spectacle the child presented and the anxious white face of her mother. Drury dashed across to the short flight of stairs up to his father's consulting-room and arrived there just as that gentleman was entering it from the hall. The look he turned upon his son was not one of unalloyed approval.

"Dru! How often have I to say that you are not to use my consulting-room as a short cut back into the house? Once and for all will you understand that if you've forgotten something you must go to the front or side door?"

"Sorry, sir, but I haven't forgotten anything this time. I've come to tell you a small girl's been brought in . . . by her mother . . . in an awful mess. A throat accident . . . serious, I'm sure."

"I daresay I should have seen that in due course," said his father with a faint smile.

"Yes, of course, Father—but I thought you ought to know at once. I didn't realise you were just coming in—it's not nine yet. I'm sure she ought to be attended to first."

"And I feel sure I should have arrived at that conclusion also in a very few moments," said Robert Hamilton, taking out his watch, looking at it and putting it back again. "Hurry off to school—you'll be late again, as it is."

Drury retreated, waiting, however, a few seconds in the hall, watching his father move out on to the little landing beyond the consulting-room, to stand looking down upon the waiting patients.

"Bring the little girl up, please," he said.

Satisfied, Drury hurried out of the house, ran round the side of it to the shed and wheeled out the bicycle standing inside. It was his brother's, but it wouldn't do Euan any harm to be without his bike for a morning. Holidays for Euan's school had started yesterday, but at Fairhill Grammar there were still three days to go. Do Euan good to walk, anyway, if he wanted to go anywhere. So reasoning, Drury mounted the cycle and rode away. With luck he'd get no more than a hundred lines—end-of-term slackness, he hoped!

Reaching home at midday he put the cycle back in the shed and found at the lunch-table that it hadn't been missed. One argument saved, anyway. His father, who had had a busy morning, came in just as the meal started and at once Drury asked for a report on Jessica's case. Had he stitched the wound?

"No, quite useless," said Robert Hamilton. "Every time she raised her head the stitches would have been torn out. The wound must heal itself. The child's in for a painful time, I'm afraid. But she's had a very lucky escape."

"Lockjaw?" Drury asked.

"I can't swear she'll escape that. She will, I think, if the wound is thoroughly cleansed every time she has anything to eat. The mother struck me as a very sensible woman, who stood up to the situation admirably. And the child was very plucky. No tears. Well, she'll need all the pluck she can find for some time to come, for her life is going to depend upon the thoroughness with which the wound is kept clean. She has, of course, lost a lot of blood; it was that which scared her mother so much, but she seems a very healthy little girl and should soon make it up. It might have been much worse—another inch to the right and we should have had trouble indeed."

"The jugular? Good lord!" said Drury, who was

knowledgeable about these large veins beneath the ears which conduct the blood from the head and face back to the heart; for he meant to follow in his father's footsteps and go to Medical School directly he was through with his last year of what he thought of as his 'ordinary' education and had got his matric. He said, "Heavens, yes—the hæmorrhage would have been a lot worse then, of course."

"And the shock, too. The effect upon the heart would have been extremely severe, owing to the exhausting action of the right auricle."

"Spare us, if you please, Pa," said Euan, "the gory details at the lunch-table. Dru can have a private pow-wow with you later on."

Euan had no intention of becoming a doctor. He was not, however, as revolted by the conversation as he sounded. Illness bored him and accidents he preferred not to think about. It was the ten-year-old Linda, a sensible, level-headed young person, rapidly becoming aware of the importance of being feminine gender, who said, "Why, she might have knocked all her teeth out! How awful! What's her name, Father?"

"Jessica Bond," said Drury promptly. "They call her 'Jessie' in the family circle, I believe."

"How do you know that?" asked his father.

Drury gave a very brief account of the football incident, minimising his own part in it, and praising Jessica's pluck.

"Always the gallant knight-errant!" said Euan, with his annoying grin.

"She seems a rather unfortunate child, Robert," Mrs. Hamilton remarked. "How did this accident occur?"

"The way most accidents do, I suppose, my dear. A moment's thoughtlessness, a careless push. . . . The two sisters, I understand, were getting ready for school and were reaching for first go at the long button-hook to do up their boots. It hangs, apparently, on the wall of the kitchen, which is reached by three steps. Down these, somehow or other, Jessica fell headlong, catching her throat on the sharp edge of an adjacent chair. But I didn't ask any questions. It was the result, rather than the 'how', I was concerned with."

"The Bonds aren't patients of yours?" Mrs. Hamilton asked.

"I understand that they go to Martin, but the child couldn't have walked as far in her condition. The poor mother was in great distress, despite her quiet bearing."

"They live up this end, do they?"

"Yes. In Thelma Road."

"Oh," said Dorothy Hamilton, and Drury looked sharply across at her. For his mother, as for most of the people who lived in the upper part of Fairhill Road, the social boundary was set at The Avenue. This amused Drury, who had no social sense whatever and, according to his brother, a liking for the oddest people—but, according to Drury himself, for 'just people'.

"Can she go to school?" he asked his father.

"In a day or so, if all goes well, and as long as she can be taken and fetched, which, I imagine, won't be very easy."

"There's an elder sister."

"You seem very well informed," his father said.

"Not as well as I should like," Drury told him.

He'd like to know just *how* bad that wound was, and *just* how it had happened, and how Jessica was enduring the painful business of having it washed after her lunch—though probably the poor mite hadn't wanted any lunch. And he'd like to know when his father was seeing her again. But he refrained from asking, and already the conversation had moved away from Jessica and her misfortune.

"Have you many visits this afternoon, Robert? Or can you spare the brougham for an hour?" his mother was asking.

"At what time, my dear?"

"Between four and five would do. Linda and I have a little shopping to attend to."

"That should be possible, my dear." Robert looked at his watch and told Drury that it was time he 'made a move'.

"Were you late this morning?" he asked.

"Saved my bacon by a few seconds, sir," Drury said, but did not say how this feat was accomplished.

He went away to wash his hands and brush his teeth and

found himself remembering that "Oh" of his mother's at the mention of Thelma Road, and was vaguely annoyed, for some reason. Generally these snobbisms of Fairhill amused him; he accepted the fact that his mother was as much a snob as the rest of 'Upper' Fairhill. But to-day he was definitely annoyed. "*Can you spare the brougham, Robert? Linda and I have a little shopping to attend to,*" he mimicked. Do 'em both good to walk across the Common four times a day, as I do! he thought, wondering why he should suddenly mind about something that had never before done anything but amuse him.

But, after all, this was the year nineteen-hundred-and-two. The Victorian era was done and finished with, like that tiresome affair in South Africa, to all intents and purposes, anyway, and in the early summer King Edward was to be crowned. The new century was forging ahead. Despite all that chap Kipling had been saying about the craze for sport—*flannelled fools at the wicket* or *muddled oafs at the goals*—and despite the mania for bridge and ping-pong, all sorts of really important things were happening. Organised research into disease—like cancer, and this new treatment for tuberculosis and the scheme for spending some terrific sum on the building and equipping of a sanatorium down in Sussex. In the face of such things what did it matter if a few people in one half of a London suburb wouldn't 'know' those who lived in the other half? It didn't, of course, matter a brass farthing. His annoyance sprang, he knew, from some quite other source—from having that charming child set down below the salt.

It was a pity, he reflected, that there were no dressings to be taken along, and no ostensible reason for making a call at Number Six, Thelma Road. He'd leave it for a day or two and then go and inquire after her. And this, two days later, he did, though by then it was quite unnecessary, since his father had told him that he was 'very satisfied' with his little patient's progress. The mother found her task very upsetting, but it was evident that she was performing it with thoroughness.

Drury recognised the woman who opened the door to him as the same person whom he had encountered at the gate to his father's surgery—would have recognised her anywhere by her

fine dark eyes, even if her rather tense expression had not reminded him of the one her face had worn that morning and which, he suspected, indicated that he had called her away from her distressing task. It was clear she did not recognise him; that morning at the gate she had not seen him at all, had merely *looked* at him. But Drury was seldom nonplussed and was not now. He said, "I'm Drury Hamilton. I wondered if I could see Jessica. I don't know if you've heard that we became acquainted some little while ago over a football?"

"Please come in, Mr. Hamilton," Emma said, her worried face lighted by a sudden smile. "I've always wanted to thank you for what you did that morning."

"Don't thank me. I enjoyed doing it. I'm afraid I've come at an awkward moment. Is it your tea-time?"

"Oh no. We were early with tea to-day, my other daughter having gone to tea with a school friend, and I was just about to deal with Jessie's throat. Please come through."

She led the way into the kitchen, where Jessica sat with the bandages around her tawny head, looking pale and apprehensive. The kitchen was rather warm, very clean and tidy and with no sign of any sharp-edged low chair by the range, though the long pearl-handled button-hook hung on the wall.

"Well, Jessica, how are you?" he asked. "Better, I hope?"

She nodded, smiling shyly, her eyes very bright as if they held back tears.

"This business upsets her," said Emma. "I have a little trouble to get her to eat her meals because of what must follow. She is better over it when Nurse Greenham does it, though I try not to hurt her. Nurse Greenham is the daughter of a neighbour of ours—she comes in when she's off duty . . ."

"And to-day she's not? Well, Jessica, suppose you let me see what I can do?"

She looked at him and nodded.

"But I must first wash my hands thoroughly," he said, and Emma brought him a clean towel and preceded him into the scullery.

"We've no bathroom," she said apologetically, "and I use the sink because the doctor said running water was best."

"Quite right."

Drying his hands on the clean towel Emma proffered, he walked back into the kitchen.

"The lethal chair has vanished, I see," he observed lightly.

"Yes, indeed. I've told my husband to chop it up for firewood. It was a comfortable chair, but after this I shouldn't have had an easy moment if it had been left there."

"It was bad luck, certainly," and an error of judgment, he thought, to have hung the button-hook above it.

"There was no need for the scramble—they had plenty of time for school, but Jessie does everything quickly, and if she'd been in less of a hurry on this occasion all would have been well. Making a race of it was the trouble."

"Ethie *pushed* me!" said Jessica quietly.

"It was just an unfortunate accident," said her mother.

"She pushed me . . . *hard* . . . in the middle of the back—I was in front," said Jessica again, without indignation or anger; with nothing but a steady determination to tell the truth, however it was discouraged and called something else.

"Now, Jessie, don't start that all over again," said her mother soothingly. "It doesn't do any good."

As if she accepted that statement, at least, Jessie said, addressing no one in particular, "It's so hot in here."

"It will be cooler in the scullery," said Drury. "Suppose you let me see what I can do with that bandage."

Emma watched the operation with an unexpected sense of relief. This, to her, was always the worst part of the whole business, for, however careful she was, the wound would bleed a little, and it always alarmed her in case it started to do so severely again. But this was an astonishing young man, calm, efficient, untroubled by any such fears, his hands slowly drawing away first the bandage and then the pad of cotton-wool so expertly and gently that it seemed to Emma nothing less than a miracle. He showed not the least sign of any fear of giving pain (as she knew she always did) and the operation drew neither tears nor recoil from Jessica.

"Brave child!" he commended her, then looked at the wound with the care, and something too, Emma thought, of the

satisfaction, which his father had shown on his last visit. "Going on fine," he said. "That's really capital, Mrs. Bond. We shall be soon quite out of the wood if we go on as we're doing now." But she'd carry the scar to her grave, he thought, though, luckily, it wouldn't be seen. "Now let us see how clever we can be," he said to Jessica.

He drew her out of her chair and into the scullery, and while he turned on the taps Emma tied back her daughter's tawny mop of hair. The preparations ready, he showed Jessica how to stand most comfortably against him, and then, supporting her head, as she held it over the bowl, with the palm of his left hand, he began the sponging of the wound. She did not resist or make the movement towards release so familiar to her mother, and she saw why—Drury knew exactly how to make it impossible. For all his gentleness, he was firm; held as she was against his thigh, her head gently but resolutely kept rigid in the palm of his hand, she was powerless to move, even had she tried. Emma gratefully acknowledged that, as with Bessie Greenham, the business was to-day far less of an ordeal for the child than it was when she herself was in charge. For, as usual, Emma saw disaster ahead unless she could achieve the thoroughness enjoined upon her by Dr. Hamilton, and her efforts to this end were almost as painful to her as to Jessie, and her fear of failure communicated itself to the child. But this young man poured confidence into her, as did Nurse Greenham, and when at last he turned off the taps and released her, Emma was at his side ready with a towel (which Drury noted with approval was another clean one) to dry the child's face and throat.

"Well done!" he complimented the patient. "Splendid! The braver you can be the quicker it will all be over. And each time it will get a little better, and presently it won't hurt at all. Now, let us see what we can do with a fresh bandage, shall we?"

Emma had set out all that he required on the kitchen table, and as she watched she was moved to say, "I think you would make a very good doctor yourself, Mr. Hamilton."

"So do I," said Drury, who had never been called 'Mr.

Hamilton' before, and seemed to find it rather amusing. "How's that, Jessica? Comfy, or too tight?"

Jessica said, "Comfy, thank you," and Drury thought her low-registered voice, as soft as velvet, would, as she grew up, be one of her unfailing attractions, though this afternoon she wasn't saying very much with it—nothing like as much as she had done three months ago as they walked together to her school. Well, perhaps it was only natural she should be shyer with him on this occasion than on that. . . .

It was Emma who interrupted this reverie. She said, "Your father thought that she might be able to go to school next week if she was taken and fetched and allowed to leave earlier than the rest of the school. He wouldn't be responsible, he said, if she had a fall or a knock. Her sister could take her, of course, but as school breaks up on Wednesday . . . they go to church on Thursday morning . . . it hardly seems worth while. I expect Dr. Hamilton forgot about the Easter holidays."

"I'm sure he did. When we are all at home he always looks a little surprised and when the truth dawns he says, 'Holidays *again*? I'm sure when I was at school there weren't so many.'"

"We say that, too," said Emma. "But Jessie is fonder of school than of holidays. She doesn't like to be kept away. But of course she has her books . . . and her piano practice . . . and a nice garden to play in."

To this Jessica said nothing, but she looked, Drury thought, as if none of them could make up for being kept from school. He wished her good-bye and told Emma not to bother about coming to the door. "I can let myself out," he said.

But Emma's good manners could not accept that. She hurried after him and he stood aside so that she might open the door for him. At the gate he turned and raised a hand (since his cap was still in his pocket) and strode off. It was later that she remembered she had not thought of the sixpence she owed him; but decided she would not have known how to offer it to him.

As he turned the corner he almost collided with a schoolgirl whose head was turned over her shoulder to call back some-

thing to another girl from whom, presumably, she had just parted.

"Sorry!" she said, turning a pair of large dark eyes upon him that seemed oddly familiar, but he was annoyed at being prodded with a very sharp elbow and assaulted with a satchel thrown over a shoulder, and said crossly, "Look where you are going!" and strode on. He was nearing his own house at the brow of the hill before he remembered where he had seen those large dark eyes before. In the pale, rather worried countenance of Mrs. Bond. . . .

This, then, was 'Ethie', the elder sister. It did not appear, he thought, that she would make much of a protector for a small girl who needed to be secured from accidental blows. So perhaps it was just as well the approach of Easter would render her services unnecessary.

"I ran into Drury Hamilton at the corner," announced Ethie, walking into the sitting-room where Emma sat with some mending, and Jessica on the hearth in front of the small fire helping Andy to build a tower with his coloured bricks. The door to the garden was open and the fire in the grate gave a pleasing suggestion of winter departing and spring returning.

"Mr. Hamilton was kind enough to come and inquire after Jessie," said Emma.

"Well, fancy that now! We're looking up in Thelma Road!"

"Don't talk nonsense," said Emma, "and whatever kind of an expression is 'ran into him'?"

"Well, it's the other way round, as a matter of fact. He came swinging round the corner like I don't know what—and *he* had the cheek to tell *me* to look where I was going!"

"So you should," said Emma calmly. "Run along and make yourself presentable. Your hair is a disgrace. If you would leave it alone instead of trying to make it curl it would look very well—as it is, it's neither one thing nor the other."

But Ethie, as usual when criticised, had shut the door behind her. Emma spoke to the air.

CHAPTER THREE

DRURY HAMILTON was in his second year at his Medical School when Jessica went to the local High School on a scholarship.

Their acquaintance through the years had not ripened, for Jessie was still very shy, and upon their infrequent encounters in Fairhill she blushed, smiled, stayed for a second or so to answer his inquiries about her progress at school, and then hurried away.

Some part of this attitude was related to her sister's long continued habit of referring at intervals to 'your admirer' or (worse) 'your beau', as much to Emma's annoyance as to Jessica's embarrassment. For Emma did not want 'ideas' put into Jessie's head. She had plenty of other and more important things to think about than 'nonsense of that kind', with which Ethie, she thought, was far too much concerned. Ethie had 'done' with school (at which she had profited little), soon after her fourteenth birthday, and was apprenticed to something known as 'the dressmaking'.

There was no doubt that Ethie was a disappointment to her parents and her poor showing at her lessons had involved them in much the same apportionment of blame between their respective forebears as, at one time, her indifferent health had done. But both were now taken for granted. Sid was minded to 'make up on Jess' and Emma on Andy, although she had been pleased enough to find that Jessica had sufficient brains to win a scholarship, and, later, much gratified to hear from her headmistress that she should 'do well', though at what, Emma could not imagine. For already, at fifteen, she was turning a deaf ear to the claims of teaching, or the Civil Service, the two professions which Emma considered the 'safest'. Jessica's enthusiasm was for something she called 'English', which appeared, in the school syllabus, to cover a good deal of ground that seemed to lead to little beyond good marks in her reports and occasional mild irritation in her father, at whose

liberties with the English language she persistently, though good-naturedly, mocked, as if she thought something could be done about them.

But as to that, Emma thought she knew better, for she too had a considerable regard for 'proper English', inherited from her own mother and sharpened by the years she had spent in the employ of people who spoke it as a matter of course. Of the grammar she had learnt at school she remembered little, but she had a good ear, an excellent memory and a genuine feeling for words. She was not displeased, therefore, to have an ally in the campaign she had pursued for so long, if with less assiduity than Jessica perhaps with more tact, upon the good-natured but not very rewarding Sid; and, at intervals, upon the entirely unrewarding Ethie.

But that young woman Jessica had early dismissed as hopeless. No eye, no memory. She did not read, therefore she could not spell. No ear, therefore she couldn't pronounce, and the affected lah-de-dah accent she tacked on to inaccuracy was to Jessica quite excruciating. She was aware that she did not like her sister very much, but reflected that, as she was so fond of boys, perhaps she'd get married early, and then she, Jessica, need not think of her any more.

However, this satisfactory event had not taken place by the time Jessica was through matriculation, with Honours in English; but Ethie had boy friends with whom she cycled round the Common on summer evenings, and she was in constant trouble at home for staying out after nine o'clock. It was now the year nineteen-hundred-and-ten and the collective male parental hand in this matter lay considerably less heavy upon the female young of the species than was Sid's upon his elder daughter, until Jessica, announcing herself at seventeen as a suitable candidate for a door key, automatically swept her sister into freedom with her. And much to Sid's annoyance, for what he recognised as 'only fair' he also recognised as folly, since Ethie, he considered, made herself 'cheap' with boys as silly as herself, and was just the sort, he complained to an indignant Emma, to get herself into 'trouble'. A mistake ever to have let her have that bicycle, Sid contended; but, Emma

pointed out, she had bought it out of her dressmaking earnings, and you couldn't stop her buying what she liked with her own money. Not knowing the answer to this, Sid declared that the best thing she could do was to find herself a husband. What a hope! He wasn't putting his money on *that* horse! What working man would want a wife dolled up as Ethie was?—and always ailing, too! True, she had a good conceit of herself, but that kite wouldn't fly very high, if you asked *him*!

Nobody did. Worried as she often was about her elder daughter, Emma did not take so poor a view of her future. After all, she still went to chapel on Sundays, and no one could say she hadn't been taught the difference between right and wrong. Right and wrong, Sid postulated, hadn't anything to do with it. Ethie was downright silly—and about that you could do nothing at all; and where she got it from, heaven alone knew!

Jess was a different proposition altogether, he considered. Nothing silly about *her*! She had her head screwed on the right way, even if she did sometimes make you feel that no one else in the family had. She had her fair share of good looks and she had brains, but nonetheless after her matriculation the question of her future worried her parents more than a little, since of the two occupations upon which Emma had set her heart it was clear that Jessica was choosing neither. Soon she was putting forward a suggestion of her own—something which Emma thought of as one of her 'fancy' ideas. She wanted, she said, to be a journalist. And it all came, Emma believed, from those accounts of the chapel bazaars and other such events which she had contributed to the local paper—and that at the pastor's suggestion. Nobody actually, more proud and pleased at the time than Em; but this extension of the idea was quite another matter.

However, it soon became evident that Jessica had already been making inquiries on the matter, and had been told that the thing to do was to try to get on to the editorial staff of a provincial newspaper. You would then, she explained to her mother, be sent to report local occasions—a fête, a garden party, the opening of this or that.

Emma said at once, "But a provincial newspaper would

mean going away from home," to which Jessica agreed. But where would she possibly live? Emma exclaimed—a girl just past her sixteenth birthday! The idea was ridiculous, quite out of the question, and still would be, even if she stayed on at school for another year, which, at least under the terms of her scholarship, Emma didn't suppose was possible. The idea of her daughter living alone away from home would, it was clear, at seventeen, eighteen, and indeed at any age at all, be completely unacceptable to Emma. Why couldn't she make up her mind to the Civil Service if she didn't want to teach—with a good starting salary, opportunities for advancement and a pension on retirement? And perhaps a bonus if she married. This seemed to amuse Jessica, who said she didn't want to spend her life taking examinations, couldn't imagine herself at retirement age, and didn't suppose she'd ever get married. And there the argument in the summer of nineteen-ten had come, if not to an end, at least to rest.

It was just before school broke up for the holiday that Emma, who could not but see that Jessica was very much in earnest, now made a suggestion which ended the stalemate. Why not go to one of those Business Colleges, where she could learn shorthand and typewriting, which (said Emma artfully) she had always understood journalists needed to know, and other commercial subjects? Then she could get a situation in an office until she was older and 'this journalistic business' could be seriously considered, if she still wanted to go on with it.

To her relief, and considerably to her surprise, Jessica agreed to this idea. She consulted her headmistress, who recommended a Business College of which she had considerable personal knowledge and which only accepted pupils who had reached a good standard of education, undertaking to find suitable posts for them when they had passed the College's examination and taken the diplomas of the Society of Arts and Chamber of Commerce.

The only complaint Emma could find with this information was that the College recommended was in the City of London, which would mean fares and lunches in addition to the

twenty-five guineas required for the twelve months' course, and she had attempted to put forward Jessica's youth as a reason for finding a Commercial School nearer home; but Jessica was not to be side-tracked. The idea of going up to town each day immensely intrigued her, and she pointed out that she was in her seventeenth year, that she was perfectly capable of looking after herself and would undertake to do so. For once it was Sid who saw dragons in the path, all the things that could happen to a young, attractive girl travelling to and from the City each day, and Emma who laughed at his fears and intimated that his dragons were overdrawn, and that in any case Jess was not 'that sort'.

"She's not in the least interested in men, thank goodness! and I'm sure few men would dare to speak to her—and if they did they'd regret it. I don't believe she's really noticed there are any boys in the world—even young Dr. Hamilton never gets anything more from her than an ordinarily polite greeting when they meet in the street. At least, according to Ethie, who always knows things of that sort—goodness knows how! Anyway, I'm sure Jess has her mind on other things than men and marriage."

"I should 'ope so, at 'er age," said Sid, his aspirates, as usual, flying in the wind of his indignation; but he knew that Emma had combined with Jessica against him, and that she was determined to instal her at this Commercial School because she hoped thereby to deflect her from the provinces; that she would get a situation in some office or other and settle down until 'Mr. Right' in due course came along.

So at the end of August, by which time Jessica had ascertained from her headmistress that the Commercial School she had recommended would be reassembling its pupils after the summer recess, she and Emma set out for that unknown bourn, 'the City', and found the Commercial College housed in an imposing building and in the charge of a tall Irishman named Gwynne, who soon made it flatteringly clear to Emma that Jessica was exactly the sort of student the College welcomed.

"There are to-day," he told them, "so many excellent

openings for capable and fully-trained shorthand-typists that we are besieged by would-be students of the wrong kind. However, the examination in English spelling and grammar, to which we require prospective students to submit before enrolling them, weeds out the wrong type very thoroughly. But in view of your daughter's matriculation and her English Honours, she will, of course, not be troubled with this."

So Emma paid over her twenty-five guineas, which she had withdrawn from her post office pre-marriage savings, received a receipt from the secretary and agreed with alacrity to Mr. Gwynne's suggestion that they might like to look over the school. She found everything very satisfactory, and was confirmed in the opinion which she had already imbibed from Jessica's headmistress—both as to the school and to Jessica's capabilities. "A wise choice," she had said. "I'm quite sure that Jessica will make an excellent secretary."

As she had expected to do, Jessica very much enjoyed her daily journey to and from the City, for it gave her a sense of freedom and adventure that from the first paid handsome dividends to her youthful curiosity and ambition. Such fears as Emma had harboured over permitting so young a girl to go so far afield for her tuition speedily faded out, and she was reassured of her statement to Sid that Jess could be trusted and was well able to look after herself. She knew, though she would not have so expressed it, that there was something about her young daughter which made you feel she was armoured from head to foot, not alone by her innocence but by her native pride and independence. Nor was there any reason to doubt the success of this commercial venture; for clearly she was enjoying the Course and not likely to be beaten at this business of learning to write shorthand, though Emma, glancing through the Pitmanic *Instructor* and able to make, as she said, neither head nor tail of it all, would not have blamed her if she had shown every sign of defeat. But Jessica not only found the theory of Pitman's stenography absorbingly interesting, she discovered that it gave her a new angle from which to consider English words and their construction. Moreover, it

was exciting at times to come upon people in the books she read who had learnt shorthand—like Hilda Lessways in Arnold Bennett's *Clayhanger*, who was, it appeared, the first woman in the Five Towns to learn the art; and most amusing to read that the young man from whom Hilda took 'speed' dictation always read from newspaper articles which included the words 'capital punishment' because 'capital punishment' was a 'famous grammalogue'. Apart from the fact that it wasn't, it set her speculating as to what events, at the time in which the tale was set, were being so widely reported that such a phrase should so frequently be mentioned. Then, too, in *Love and Mr. Lewisham* there was Mr. Wells's amusing notion that shorthand could be written with a stylographic pen, and, later, the Commercial College in Oliver Onions's first volume of his *In Accordance with the Evidence* trilogy and, in the last, his clever use of shorthand in working out the plot and fastening the murder on to the right person.

It seemed to Emma that these phonographic studies by day were more than sufficient for a growing girl, and she could not understand why Jess must add to them by attending what she then called University Extension Lectures in English Literature, and was soon to refer to as 'Eng. Lit'. True, this had been her favourite subject at school, but whatever use could further study be to her now? Jessica had said, "No practical use, perhaps . . . though I'm not sure even of that. But, anyway, English Literature is something you study for its own sake. It isn't just a bread-and-butter subject." And there the matter rested.

It was about this time that Drury Hamilton encountered her as she was coming out of the station one evening and they walked up Fairhill Road together. He hadn't set eyes upon her for the best part of a year, and he thought how gracefully she was achieving the edgy business of growing up. There was a warm glow in her face, and the familiar mass of shining hair waved and curled back beneath her hat and was secured with a large bow of black ribbon at the nape of her slim neck. A quick calculation told him that she must now be well on the way to her

seventeenth birthday. She looked happy and alert, as if she found life exciting and satisfying. Drury, now in his twenty-fourth year, was through his exams and partnering his father, who was getting on in years and not in the best of health, whilst his practice had increased with the growth of the suburb. Jessica's youth and eagerness made him feel a little staid, perhaps because he was not much given to noticing young girls. It was as if the pretty child he had encountered as a schoolboy had blocked his vision. He could this afternoon have wished her older than her years, more 'aware' and not without a suspicion that he was at least a little in love with her. But no such thought, he knew, had occurred to her—she was innocent, ignorant, entirely unawakened. For her, wrapped up in her new studies, in her pursuit of English literature, young men did not exist. He had a fugitive thought that the state was dangerous—doubtful so for one so essentially feminine and so attractive. And this business world for which she was headed seemed to him, as he looked at her, to be a forest of ravening wolves. Which, he thought, is ridiculous.

At the parting of their ways they both halted, and almost at once, with a smiling "Good-bye", Jessica turned away into the side road, but at that very moment two of the books she was carrying turned traitor and hurled themselves from the curve of her arm to the pavement. She stooped at once to retrieve them, not having yet arrived at that social stage when young women leave it gracefully to their masculine escorts to do such things for them. Drury dived, too, with the result that they collided, Jessica's hat slipped to the back of her head and Drury lost his altogether, and had to collect it from the gutter. This made them both laugh, and under cover of their mutual confusion he made good his escape—he didn't know from what. From the sense, perhaps, of having looked foolish, felt foolish, or thought a lot of foolish things? All three, he decided, and strode on up the hill. Let her alone, my lad—she's never heard of Love. . . .

Which was true, though Jessica, not for the first time, wondered as she went home why it was that the cool detached attitude she always found so easy to maintain where other

young men of her acquaintance were concerned always seemed to desert her with Drury. But she didn't pursue the thought, as she put the key in the lock of the door and let herself into the house. She was home again, where she so much liked to be.

Well before her year's Course had come to an end Jessica had taken the College's Diploma, together with those of the two Societies for whose exams she sat as part of her year's work. But to amuse herself she decided also to sit for the Diploma of the Incorporated Phonographic Society—the shorthand degree—and when this too was in her possession she said to Emma, “Well, there you are, Mother! Now I shall never starve. If I can do nothing else I shall be able to *teach* shorthand.”

It was about this time that Emma decided that Jessica was obviously the brains of the family, for Andy, though intelligent, was extremely easy-going, and had much disappointed his parents by failing to win the scholarship for which he had recently sat, and which would have taken him to the Grammar School for three years. He had grown into a nice-looking lad, rather tall for his age, good-tempered and with a simple but infectious sense of humour. He and Jessica were good friends and his fondness for Dickens made common ground between them, and coloured much of their conversation, often to Sid's complete mystification. He was also fond of games, which he played well, taking after his father, who had reluctantly relinquished them years ago on the altar of Emma's little god of Worry. He longed for a cycle, which Emma strongly opposed his having, for, apart from its cost and the fact that she considered cycling had become a more dangerous pastime than ever, she had decided that to possess a ‘bike’ was to become automatically a member of the Monkeys' Parade on the Common, as were Ethie and her associates—all of which amused Andy considerably. But there was nothing he could do about it, and he did not question his mother's ruling that, had he spent as much time on his studies as he had on the ‘side shows’, he might have won his scholarship and,

maybe, have been rewarded with a bicycle as a birthday present.

However, Emma consoled herself, there was another year of compulsory schooling before Andy yet, and he might be given another chance at the scholarship exam. Meantime, here were the summer holidays again, and this year she felt that something must be done over them. Jess certainly must have a holiday before going into an office: she had worked hard and had earned it. But she and Sid greatly disliked seaside lodgings and had gone away as infrequently as possible during the earlier years of their marriage. But now the children were old enough to go away together, unchaperoned, if it was possible to find the right accommodation for them, say at Brighton or Hastings. This idea did not very much please Jessica, though she was willing to fall in with any plans her mother could make, but before anything could be done, a letter from Grandmother Bond arrived. Her crabbed, baffling hieroglyphics were handed over, as usual, to Jessica, the acknowledged scribe of the family, to read; and as the deciphering of various scripts had been part of her training, her grandmother's no longer gave her any trouble whatever. After giving 'the news', Grandmother Bond announced that she and 'father' were getting on in years; that it was some time since they had seen their grandchildren, and what about a visit this summer?

Nothing, thought Emma, could have been more timely. Such a visit would resolve the question of the change of air the children needed and give pleasure to 'the old people'.

From this scheme, however, Ethie was quick to excuse herself by saying that she only got a week off from 'the millinery', to which she had just changed over from 'the dressmaking', and it wouldn't be worth spending 'all that money' to go to Lincolnshire for just a week. What she meant was that she had no intention of spending it in the depths of the country 'doing nothing'.

The visits to the grandparents had been infrequent, for Emma did not enjoy getting herself about with three young children, and so Sid had met most of the claims of his family without her, taking one or other of the children with him. Only once had

they travelled *en famille*, but that had been enough for Ethie. Andy, however, had not been old enough to remember very much about it, and now found the idea of going to the country exciting. Jessica well remembered the Lincolnshire countryside, and the farm her grandparents rented and worked with the help of their two sons who had not deserted the countryside as had their elder brother. The sense of space with which it had left her had endured, and the memory of the reflections after a rainy day, particularly as she had seen them from the hay-loft, looking across the wide stretch of open country and up at the sweep of sky. She had, too, a very clear recollection of the old town of Stamford, into which on several occasions she had been driven by one or other of her uncles—the old stone houses, the tall spires of its many churches, whose names she had forgotten. But she had remembered the name of Stamford's river, which she knew now was Peterborough's river also—the great Welland which, as her grandfather had told her, had been tamed as long ago as the reign of William the Conqueror; the fields of ripening corn, the bright red farm wagons, the pink and purple of willow-herb and loosestrife. But, above all, she remembered that sense of space.

Ethie, however, that natural debunker, had found it very dull. 'Flat and marshy' was the phrase she had used and Jessica had covered her with scorn. "*Marsh!*—it's *fen* country, not marsh!" she had said indignantly, and Ethie, very bored, had inquired what was the difference, and did not wait for an answer. It was the young Andy who had received the information that the 'marsh' was made by the sea (and was therefore all on the east), but the fen was made by the river and by water flowing down from the hills, and also that Ethie was 'essentially an urban type'—a description of their sister which had satisfied Jessica as much as it had puzzled Andy. Country of *any* kind would be wasted on Ethie!

There was a good deal more she could have said about that earlier visit, but not to Ethie. How, for instance, she had discovered that Glen Farm was only a few miles beyond the little town of Bourne, which was the birthplace of Hereward the Wake, who had immortalised the Fens and had himself been

immortalised by Charles Kingsley's novel. It was the book which her Form at school had that year been reading, and the fact that her father as a boy had lived so near the scene of Hereward's exploits and seemed so unaware of it was astonishing. When Jessica said so, he replied, "Well, well, it was a long time ago, my girl—probably only an old yarn!"

She did her best to enlighten him, but Sid had not paid much heed to the history lessons. He was, she felt, strangely lacking in any sense of the Past. But maybe he hadn't been given Kingsley's novel to read at school!

It seemed to her now, nearing her seventeenth birthday, an odd choice for girls of thirteen or fourteen years to read in class. She remembered how embarrassed she had been at certain passages which it had fallen to her lot to read aloud, to the giggles of the equally ill-informed and the sniggers of the enlightened.

Andy was as delighted as Jessica when the proposed visit was finally arranged, Emma deciding that they could make the journey together and that Sid and she, with the reluctant Ethie, would come down for their last week-end. It occurred to Jessica that as they would be following the Great North Road one should say 'up' and not 'down', but she knew that, for her mother, whichever direction you took from London you declined.

With everything thus settled, even Emma and Sid now began to look forward to their trip—it was the word they both used. 'Urban types' they well might by now have become, but they had come from the country and had no objection to paying it an occasional visit—living in it was a different matter. And though they felt on this occasion that the so-frequently-ailing Ethie needed a change of air quite as much as her brother and sister, it was nobody's fault but her own that she would get no more than a week-end. However, Jess would be well set up for the winter, and for the office work she would be undertaking upon her return—since no more, thank goodness, had been heard of this plan for gallivanting off to 'the provinces'. And although Andy had not worked as hard as his sister, or, indeed, 'hard' by any standard, a fortnight in the

country wouldn't do him any harm. And he and Jess were always happy together.

Emma, in short, was well-pleased with the way in which things had 'worked out'. And Sid equally pleased to see that for the time being, at least, she had thrown her worries overboard, had ceased to bemoan Ethie's 'odd ways' and Andy's casual attitude to this business of 'getting educated', as to that of earning a living.

The last thing she had expected was that Andy's holiday at the farm would resolve the latter problem; but that is what happened. Andy had suddenly discovered what it was he wanted to do when he left school—he wanted to learn to farm. It was evident enough to Emma that this idea had been most strongly encouraged by his grandparents and uncles; but she protested that he had another compulsory year at school and showed clearly that she believed the idea would fizzle out long before then.

It amused Sid to hear her on this theme, for, having worried herself sick for the last few months because the boy had no idea in his head about 'what he wanted to do', she must now deride him when he announced that he had. Yet, as the days passed, all the signs were against the belief that the idea would 'fizzle out'. Andy made no fuss about his final year at school, appeared, indeed, to work with more application than hitherto; and at home had his eyes glued to the pages of everything he could procure from the Public Library about the Fens and Fenland farming and about the county of Lincolnshire. At Easter he coaxed out of his mother the balance of his fare (towards which, it appeared, he had saved all his pocket money since the summer visit) and went off to the farm directly school broke up. Emma resigned herself, as time went on, though not without lamentation, to the inevitable. The land, said Sid calmly, was taking back its own.

It was shortly after returning from the summer holiday that Jessica secured her first post—a temporary 'holiday season' vacancy which she took for the sake of experience, was paid a pound a week and retained for some six weeks. Her second was

a permanency which brought her a rise of ten shillings in salary, which rose to thirty-five before she left, a year later, to take up the kind of post she had always wanted, but this, too, was only a temporary vacancy caused by illness; and Emma thought she must have been mad to make the change. But it appeared that Jessica knew exactly what she was doing. The work was in a printers' and publishers' office and, temporary or not, the change gave her the opportunity to begin to learn what she could learn nowhere else. She made good use of her eyes, was always willing to assist and, if necessary, to stay overtime, and if her salary did not rise her spirits certainly did, for she felt she was at last on the right path and was enjoying life immensely. Her father opined that she seemed to have her head firmly screwed on, and even her mother had to admit as much, though hoping she wouldn't flit about too much. (Emma's idea of a good situation was one in which you settled down, with no thought of change—'bogged down' was Jessica's phrase for it.) But she laughed at Sid's description of her as a 'child', for she had just passed her eighteenth birthday and it could not, surely, have escaped him that she had 'put up' her hair? It had not, but Sid a little regretted that the black bow at the nape of her slender neck had disappeared, though he approved the way the bright mane was loosely twisted low on her well-shaped head instead of being dragged to the top of it, as was the alternative fashion, which, so Sid maintained, made all women look like charwomen. The old joke that she always walked as if she had a train to catch still had point, and also the less kind one that she walked as if she owned the place. For Jessica moved as purposefully as ever, as if no day was ever quite long enough for all she wanted to do in it. She wore the eager, glowing look of one who sipped the honey of life, whose soul had elbow-room.

At this stage of her development Drury Hamilton's acquaintance with her had advanced but little. He was now a familiar figure in Fairhill, striding about on his long legs, carrying his little black bag, his bowler sitting jauntily on his thick dark hair, his umbrella, neatly rolled, hooked over his arm. Though the Bonds had long since become patients of his father's, Drury did

not attend them, for Emma, certainly, would have been more than a little embarrassed by so young a doctor. In Emma's opinion doctors should be, if not middle-aged, at least married men.

It was Linda Hamilton, home from her boarding school and at a loose end, who said one day that she considered Jessica Bond the nicest-looking girl in Fairhill, even though she spoilt it (and annoyed Drury) by adding, "And she doesn't *look* common, either!" She hadn't really meant anything but a compliment, for it did seem most odd to her that the daughter of a working-class family should look not in the least like one, especially when you considered the sister! But Jessica, it was clear, was not looking for patronage in Fairhill. She was never seen on the tennis courts at the top of Fairhill Road, nor at the town swimming baths. She had the reputation of being clever, and the adjective 'booky' had long been tacked on to her, since she was so frequently to be encountered on Saturday afternoons with three or four volumes under her arm, clearly bound for, or coming from, the local library.

It was Linda, a 'finished' young lady now, with time on her hands, who began to introduce Jessica's name into the family circle, aiming it mostly at Drury. "I saw your Jessica to-day," she would say, or yesterday, or whenever it was, although alas, thought Drury, she was very far from 'his' or, he hoped, anybody else's. She wore persistently that little air of aloofness so discouraging to Fairhill's young men, with none of whom she was ever seen, except for a moment or two in the morning on the railway platform as the train was running in, or upon some other equally fleeting occasion. Linda opined that she was 'stuck up' and probably a 'man-hater', and Drury, who did not believe she was either, reflected that if she knew other men in town to whom she was kinder, at least she was never to be seen with them in Fairhill. He took what comfort he could from that.

It was from Ethie he learned that she had, in fact, two young men friends.

Ethie, in the March of nineteen-thirteen, acquired a stomach ulcer, and it gave her great satisfaction when, Dr. Hamilton

being on holiday, Drury arrived in his stead. As usual, she made the most of her state and looked forward to his visits, fluttered her dark lashes at him and thought him a great improvement upon his father, who had a brusque tongue ("And what's wrong with *you*, young woman?") and no time at all for gossip or small talk, especially when the patient was so taken up with herself and always at least twenty-five per cent worse, in her own estimation, than she in fact was, and never so ill but that she could smarm her face with 'that stuff'. True, Linda was addicted to the same habit, but at least she made a better job of it. Robert Hamilton had nothing but a strictly professional interest in the young woman and nothing he wanted to remember of her chatter, whereas Drury soon found that on the subject nearest his heart—the doings of her younger sister—he could learn from her quite a deal that he was unlikely to hear elsewhere. No one else would have been likely to have known, of a certainty, that Jessica had these young men friends whom she never brought home.

"But they go out together . . . to theatres . . . and for walks on Saturday afternoons," she informed Drury.

"Very good for her," said Drury. "*You* should do a little walking—do you good, you know," to which Ethie replied that she had weak ankles and couldn't walk—"not really *walk*!"

It was Ethie too who told him that Jessica was soon going to another situation. "Never satisfied, mother says. Always changing. Another magazine. She seems very thrilled with the idea."

Drury said, "You must give her my best wishes, please."

"All right, I will, but I don't suppose she'll want them."

This was harsher than Ethie, this time, had meant. The word she required was 'need', so Drury smiled and said, "Good wishes can hurt no one."

He hoped, when he had to make his visits in the later afternoon, that he might encounter this elusive and ambitious younger sister of his patient's; but he never did, and presently Ethie was well again and he no longer had any excuse for coming to the house. Somehow or other she had made it sound, despite the unknown young men, as if her 'job' was all

her sister cared about; that men, considered as anything but acquaintances, did not exist for her, that she was sexless and born for spinsterhood.

Yet he knew that the very next time he set eyes upon her he would not believe it, even if he only saw her swinging along ahead of him on the opposite side of the road. He wished there were some means of improving their acquaintance, that he could believe she ever gave him a passing thought—and could think of no single reason why she should. He wondered if she ever remembered those two occasions of her childhood and, again, could think of no reason why she should. But he remembered them with amazing, with startling distinctness that somehow to-day seemed absurd. For now, except that they happened occasionally to pass in the public street, with no more between them than a raised hat, a politely inclined head, a faint smile or a fleeting word, they might as well be living on different planets.

It was Linda who took the first step towards changing all this. Encountering Jessica one Saturday afternoon as she was leaving the branch library hard by the Common, she stopped and said, "You're Jessica Bond, aren't you? I'm Linda Hamilton. You know my brother Dru, don't you?"

Taken by surprise, the quick colour flooding her face, Jessica said, "Not very well . . ."

Linda smiled.

"You could know him a lot better if you liked," she said, and leaving that for a moment to sink in, added, "I wish you'd tell me of some good books to read . . . but I expect you read a lot of highbrow stuff. I'm afraid I don't rise much above novels. I don't suppose you read any?"

"Oh, yes," said Jessica. "I have just read *The Trespasser* by D. H. Lawrence."

And very disturbing she had found it; but this she didn't say. It had opened up a side of life of which she knew little, and at the moment wanted to know no more.

Linda said, "You're very up-to-date. My mother thinks Lawrence very 'advanced'—much too much so for me, which is idiotic, for I shall be twenty-one in June. But I don't suppose

anybody censors your reading matter. You've got a marvellous haul there. May I look?"

Jessica obligingly turned the spines of the books she carried so that their titles could be read. Linda read and exclaimed.

"Thomas Hardy, George Eliot . . . Gissing . . . *Robert Browning* by G. K. Chesterton. *Come and Find Me* by Elizabeth Robins. Never heard of her. Is she good? I'm glad you don't spurn novels, anyway. I suppose you have what Dru would call a catholic taste in reading. Don't you go to lectures on English Literature?"

"I did, but we didn't read modern fiction. I've only recently begun to explore it."

"I expect you're very highbrow. The brains in my family are all masculine gender. Euan has passed his law finals and is now a full-blown barrister, with an office in The Temple—or Chambers, I think you ought to say. But I daresay you've heard that?"

No, said Jessica, she hadn't, reflecting that that must be one of the few things Ethie had *not* told her. Generally she knew everything about everyone. All this time they'd been standing outside the library, getting in everyone's way and attracting black looks, but now Linda said, "Are you in a hurry, or can you walk home across the Common and talk?"

They walked across the Common and they talked. Of books, plays (of which Jessica had seen very few), Jessica's office work, the new post she was soon to take up and, at the gate of the Hamilton's house, of Linda's forthcoming twenty-first birthday party.

"If I send you an invitation will you come?" she asked.

Jessica had never been to a party other than the very mild affairs to which she went as a very small girl, and these were infrequent, for Sid liked his home to himself and so the Bonds gave no parties of their own. And children's parties, said Emma, were a matter of tit for tat—no 'tat' no 'tit', which made Jessica laugh, and also caused her to look coldly, as she grew older, upon the passion other people seemed to cherish for such occasions. She was, therefore, not at all exhilarated by Linda's invitation to this grown-up affair—mercifully ignorant

of the number of such events she would have to endure before she was very much older.

She didn't think she would shine at a party, for she was still a long way from losing her shyness in company. Not that she wanted to be conspicuous for 'shining', but neither did she want, at Linda's, to be conspicuous for being dull and lacking in the party spirit, which, however, she felt would be the case. She harboured a suspicion that she wasn't the party 'sort'. So she made polite noises at Linda and hoped she would forget to send the invitation.

The results of this walk and talk were subsequently related to Drury, who said at the end of the recital, "You seem to have got on together."

"Oh yes—I liked her. She isn't a bit what I expected. You know—superior, the way clever girls usually are to lesser fry, like yours truly. And she really *is* nice-looking—not just pretty. I don't wonder you're so gone on her."

Drury said calmly, "You express yourself somewhat inelegantly, if I may say so."

"Well, you can't deny it, can you? The trouble is, she doesn't seem to know there are any men in the world."

Having himself believed this and taken from it what comfort he could until Ethie had said her piece, Drury had no comment to make upon this statement, but asked instead if she had inquired how Jessica liked her new post.

"Oh yes. She said 'very much'. It's on the editorial side of some new paper for women, as far as I could make out. She wasn't exactly expansive. Rather a brainy affair, I gathered—not that she meant me to!—but the paper isn't just another of the usual sort for women. Ideas and high-thinking, I fancy. Do you think she'll come to my twenty-first?"

"Have you asked her?"

"Well, I asked her if she would if I sent her an invitation."

Drury laughed.

"Well, that commits you to nothing. But if you send it I see no reason why she shouldn't, if she's free."

On the other hand, he saw no reason why she should. Come to that, he saw no reason why anybody should ever go to a

party. It occurred to him, for some reason, that she might dislike parties as much as he did.

Jessica's 'unexpansive' attitude to Linda Hamilton's interest in her new post disguised an overwhelming delight in it. For now, as assistant to the sub-editress of a newspaper designed for intelligent women, she had at last an opportunity to make good use of knowledge she had picked up in earlier posts, and to learn thoroughly many things of which, she soon realised, she had so far acquired little more than a smattering.

Woman's Review was a monthly venture very much in the nature of an experiment, owing its inception to the belief of James Elton, the courageous head of a large London publishing concern, that there was room for a woman's magazine not almost entirely devoted to what he called 'the three f's'—fashions, fripperies and femininity. He appointed as editress a woman of some years' experience in Fleet Street who shared this opinion and was willing to leave a safe job to put it to the test, though not unaware that there were many who considered she was wasting both time and talent, especially among those who remembered her distinguished career at Oxford. However, Rose Barron argued that if women wanted the vote (and, despite Mr. Lloyd George, Mr. Churchill and Mr. Asquith, would soon, she was convinced, get it) there should be room for a magazine which appealed to the modern, forward-looking woman interested in affairs of the world and in ideas. (For this was the early spring of nineteen-fourteen, and though the cinema had arrived, its potentialities and, in particular, its influence upon women, were unsuspected.) So, equipped with a capable sub-editress, and a free hand, Rose Barron saluted Opportunity bowing on her doorstep and set to work.

It was to Gertrude March, the sub-editress, that Jessica was engaged as assistant, and her enthusiasm for the venture soon impressed not only this young woman but Rose Barron as well, for she was a girl much after their hearts, the prototype of those of whom they believed they could find sufficient to make *Woman's Review* a success. Intelligent and capable as a secretary, it was soon obvious that she was well-read, and had

made good use of her previous experience in a publishing house. Clearly, too, she was keenly interested in her work and not to be numbered among those motivated by the necessity to have 'something to do' between leaving school and the appearance upon the scene of 'Mr. Right'.

Emma, however, was considerably less happy about what she called 'yet another change'. Nor was she disposed to feel any more sanguine about it when she heard that the magazine was a new one, and Jessica knew that nothing she could say of its nature and scope was likely to engage the sympathies of her mother, who, when Jessica joined Mrs. Fawcett's National Union, had demanded to be told 'what women wanted votes for'. Men had had votes as long as she could remember, and a fine lot of difference it had made! When Jessica, ignoring that issue, had maintained that it was a matter of common justice—that the only people in England who didn't have votes were women, children and idiots, Emma remained undisturbed by this classification of her sex. Just a fuss about nothing! as she had said to Sid, all those years ago, at the time of the strike, and was now as little impressed by her daughter's talk of votes and idiots as she had been by Sid's reasons for his non-unionism. The only thing that interested—and alarmed—Emma was that Jessica was so wedded to this 'chopping and changing' instead of 'settling down'. And to throw over a certainty for something that might not last more than a month or so was to her plain idiocy.

"But, Mother!" an exasperated Jessica told her, "it's just the sort of work I've always wanted—on a *real* paper! And there's no reason why it shouldn't last! You're quite behind the times, you know. Things have changed since you were my age. Women nowadays are interested in all sorts of things, not only *feminine* things. At least, intelligent women are, and there are enough of them in the world to make a paper like the *Review* a success. It's exciting to be connected with an experiment like this!"

"That's it—an experiment! But you have a living to earn, and you can't afford 'experiments'. Your last situation was with an established concern—and safe—and you give it up for

something which mayn't last six months. I consider you've been very rash."

"Oh, Em," put in Sid, "do leave the girl alone! Give 'er a chance. She's not been out of a job a day since she left that Commercial School. She knows what she's about, and she's got a right to make a change-over if she wants to. Anyway, the firm that's bringing out this paper's a big 'un . . . not likely to go broke, if that's what's bothering you."

"Maybe, but if it doesn't catch on it'll stop, I suppose. And then where is Jessie's fine new job?"

Jessica laughed.

"I might be offered another on one of the company's other papers," she said. "If not, I shall have gained a lot of fresh experience, which would help me to get another post."

"Well, I've had my say," said her mother. "I don't deny that you haven't done well, or that you haven't done better for yourself with all your changes. But in this world a safe job's a good thing to have. However, you've made your choice and we shall see what happens."

What immediately happened was that the first number of *Woman's Review* sold out and received a decidedly good Press. Satisfactory as this was, alike to promoters and editors (and to Emma, when she was told of it), a meeting was called of the editorial staff at which the begetter of the new venture took the chair, to sit in judgment upon the issue and to discuss material for its successor. This meeting Jessica was directed to attend—she supposed, in her secretarial capacity—and it was a surprise to her when she was presently invited to take part in the discussion. As a member of the younger generation of intelligent and 'aware' young women, her point of view, she was told, was of importance, and she was asked to say what she thought and to make any suggestions which had occurred to her.

Thus encouraged, having spoken enthusiastically of the first issue of the *Review*, she suggested an extension of space for book reviews, and put in a plea for a light article—not necessarily every month but perhaps at regular intervals. It

wasn't, she said, that she considered the issue too heavy or over-serious—she recognised the paper was designed to deal with things of the moment, and she thought that the articles were all cogently argued and written with a nicely-pointed pen.

"Define 'light'," James Elton told her.

She hesitated and the warm colour flooded her face.

"I mean . . . an essay in the manner of Robert Louis Stevenson, writing of *Falling in Love*, *Choosing a Wife* and *Marriage*, or on *Being Idle*, or in that of Mr. Chesterton on . . . well on anything or nothing. There are not very many essayists to-day, I think, apart from G. K. C., but I can think of a few—Hilaire Belloc, of course, Robert Lynd, E. V. Lucas, Alpha of the Plough, and Max Beerbohm."

"Can you think of any *women* essayists?" James Elton asked her, with a smile.

Jessica hesitated, but there was no help for it—she had to admit there were very few. "Mrs. Meynell," she offered at last, "but I don't think she would be very amusing, or even 'light'. But a good many women write for periodicals the kind of article I have in mind—and I don't suppose they ever get collected. Also, I think some of our women novelists could write excellent light essays if they chose. 'Elizabeth' for one."

It was left that she should list her 'possibles' and that it could then be decided whom to approach. All were agreed that the idea was a good one. It proved, in due course, a very successful feature and Jessica sported a feather in her cap. The extension of the review pages was to stand over for further consideration.

Somewhere in all this new and surprising happiness Jessica found time to buy her first evening dress, and betook herself to Linda Hamilton's twenty-first birthday party. She didn't expect to enjoy it very much, for although she had shed much of her shyness since joining the staff of *Woman's Review*, the idea of meeting a number of people she did not know was distinctly alarming. Also, despite their odd encounters in her childhood, Drury was still no more than an old acquaintance, Linda she hardly knew and Euan not at all. There seemed to be

no reason why she should have been asked to the party or why she should go, and she found it difficult to understand why she had accepted the invitation. Perhaps it was because she now thought rather better of herself as a social being, though why, she could not imagine. It was true that at the office nowadays she had to see and talk to people whom she did not know, and in the task of making them feel at ease had gained a measure of self-confidence of her own. The task of interviewing contributors and would-be contributors, and even occasionally lunching with them, carried always the comforting circumstance of her knowing what line the conversation would take—indeed, she had grown quite clever at guiding it into the desired channel; but at a party where she would know hardly anyone, and no one well, the idea of having to initiate and sustain conversation, or to talk brightly about nothing in particular, was truly alarming. For she knew herself no chatterer. Moreover, it was highly probable she would be expected to be mistress of these new-fangled dances, whereas she knew nothing whatever about them. She had never been to a dance in her life, and all the dancing she had ever done had been at her High School reunions and socials, twirling with other girls to waltz-time or kicking up her feet in the polka and barn-dance, or, on special occasions, with her friends' brothers as partners.

The waltz, however, had long since, so she gathered, been superseded by the tango, and surely the polka and barn-dance must be completely wrapped in the cobwebs of antiquity?

However, she donned the new dress, decided that it suited her and, duly armoured with the family approval, slipped a light wrap over her shoulders and set out to walk to the Hamiltons' house on the lift of the hill, firmly refusing her father's offer of escort.

May that year—it was nineteen-fourteen—had gone out with a week of most unseasonable temperatures and dryness, in which Jessica, no lover of either, had flagged and grown pale. But this second day of June had been much more normal as to temperature and the evening was beautiful. Already, above her head, the sky was darkening, and a tiny star swung at the girdle

of the young moon. The air was soft and fresh and the leaves of the trees spaced out along the slightly rising road murmured softly beneath its caress. On such a night it seemed a great mistake to be going to a party.

However, here she was, well on the way, the light outside the front door of the Hamiltons' house shining out on to the dusk, the red glow of the surgery lamp burning as usual at the side door, party or no party.

She pushed open the gate and walked up the steps; but she did not immediately ring the bell. She stood still, gazing up and down the road as if waiting for something—someone—to make it impossible for her to go to the party after all.

June the second, nineteen-fourteen. She was to remember it all her life, not as a beautiful evening in the last summer of peace for over four years; not even as the occasion when she improved her acquaintance with Drury Hamilton; but as the evening when she had first met Gerald Harwood.

Yet in her immediate recollection of the evening Gerald Harwood was hardly in the picture. What she remembered was the cordial welcome she had received from this family of which she had known, as long as she could remember, only two members—the doctor and Drury. Her acquaintance with Linda was a very recent affair, and although she had frequently seen Euan in holiday times, striding or cycling about the neighbourhood in the livery of his famous school, they had remained strangers. But this evening as Drury, having detached Jessica from the family, was bearing her off to a quiet seat at the far end of the long, softly-lighted room, a tall, personable young man whom she at once recognised planted himself in front of them and, addressing Drury but looking at Jessica, said, "Introduce me, please."

"My brother Euan, Jessica," said Drury. "Miss Bond."

"Ah, the legend materialises at last!" Euan exclaimed, cocking an eyebrow and making her a little bow, slightly mocking, she thought. "Drury's Jessica Bond in the flesh! I could wish more love and knowledge of you this evening, my child, but I can sense the competition." He grinned at his

brother and held out his hand for Jessica's dance card. "May I—ensure against the only too obvious risks?" Having pencilled his initials once, twice, upon this he handed it back to her, made her another little exaggerated bow, and took his good looks and charm elsewhere.

"Why a 'legend'?" Jessica asked Drury as they seated themselves.

"To tease you, I expect—it's usually Euan's reason for saying anything."

"It makes me feel like a female Methuselah."

Drury laughed and said that Euan was fond of words and phrases not normally used in ordinary conversation. "When he was at school it used to be tags from the Classics, but the law was always his goal, and we soon got used to hearing our household goods referred to as *lares et penates* and our modest household as 'all that messuage entitled Clovelly, Fairhill Road, Fairhill Common, in the County of Surrey'."

At this point the little orchestra struck up, couples rose and danced around, and Drury asked her if she would like to join in. She said that she didn't think so, that she hadn't danced since she had left school. "I hadn't the time—nor, perhaps, the courage to say as much to your brother."

"I'm not much of a dancer either, I'm afraid, but you'll get on all right with Euan, never fear. Tell me about your new job. My sister makes it sound so impressive that I'm almost afraid to speak to you."

At this point the conversation had begun to flow very easily. It was as if, at last, after all these years, they had really got to know each other. Gently encouraged, Jessica talked with an ease which surprised her, of the work she did, the people she met, and of her elation at getting such a post, but all with a little air of suggesting that the chance of a lifetime had been handed to her on a plate, and that she was the luckiest girl in the world. "But of course," she suddenly interrupted herself to say, "I may fall down very heavily before long, or the paper may not survive, or some other catastrophe may occur."

But on that lovely June evening catastrophe of any kind seemed to be very far away; so very far that it was no more than

a word she found slightly ridiculous. Jessica found it very pleasant to be sitting in this pretty room, talking (much to her surprise) so easily to this young man who had hovered for so long on the fringe of her life—as easily as she supposed she must have done on that morning in her early childhood when they had first met. Now, as then, her natural, stubbornly persistent shyness slipped away from her. The gay scene, the softly lighted room, the music, and the friendliness of her reception, all combined to make her feel glad she had come, and to annihilate the mood in which she had walked up to the house and stood hesitating at its wide front door.

However, if she had expected to be allowed to sit there comfortably with Drury for the rest of the evening she had reckoned without his sister, who now, as the dance came to an end, floated across to her and broke up what she called 'this conference', bringing with her a young man who, so she told Jessica, insisted upon being introduced to her. With a curt nod to the newcomer Drury drifted away, and Jessica suffered a sudden sinking of her spirits as Linda briskly performed the introduction and floated off again. For she did not think she was going to like this Mr. Harwood, who bowed so self-consciously to her, murmured "Charmed", and sat down in the seat Drury had so summarily vacated, any more than she felt he would like her.

Nor did Gerald Harwood's introductory remark do anything for him. "I hear, Miss Bond, that you are a very clever young lady." For this was an approach she always found as embarrassing as it was annoying and silly. Because she knew of no rejoinder, save the pert and artificial, "I fear you have been misinformed," she remained silent and hoped that he would make this deduction for himself and find a speedy excuse for leaving her. Not at all nonplussed, however, by her silence, he kept his far too frankly admiring gaze fixed upon her face and said, "Someone should be paid to make embarrassing remarks all day to you, for blushing becomes you." And then, smiling at her, "Shall we dance?"

"I'm afraid I don't know any of the new dances, thank you," she told him. all her quiet happiness destroyed, its place taken

by a conviction that the evening was going to be as tiresome as she had expected. But Gerald Harwood said, "Oh, but this is our old friend, the waltz—*much* better. Come along!"

Much to her surprise she found her feet slipped easily into the familiar rhythm. To her relief, and also, for some reason, slightly to her annoyance, she found that this young man with the slightly impudent manner waltzed with assurance.

"Excellent!" he said presently, smiling down upon her. "You might have been born waltzing!" (*What* a remark, she thought.) "Do you reverse?"

She found she did, and having gained a little confidence found also that she was enjoying the dance very much. And this, perversely, annoyed her, since she was convinced that it was her partner's skill, not her own, which accounted for the enjoyment. This young man obviously thought so well of himself that it would have been a little satisfactory to have found that his waltzing left something to be desired. But it didn't, and she felt that somehow injustice had been done.

When the music came to an end there was a determined exodus to the dining-room, and steering her towards the door Mr. Harwood said, "We shall now drink champagne and say 'Happy birthday'."

The champagne was handed round, someone made a little speech wishing Linda long life and happiness and many other things it is considered essential to wish a pretty girl on her twenty-first birthday, and Jessica found herself sipping diffidently at her glass. Although in the last few months she had acquired a bowing acquaintance with wine and had learnt to ask and answer the question, "What will you drink?" with some show of knowledge, champagne was something she had not tasted before; and she saw that Mr. Harwood was amused by her tentative approach to it. It was Drury who brought her things to eat and did not seem to notice what she was doing with her drink, and as he stayed near at hand, Mr. Harwood presently drifted away. Champagne, certainly, was no stranger to him! As she looked across the room she saw that his glass had been replenished and also, happily, that he appeared to have forgotten all about her.

"Well?" said Drury, "did you enjoy your waltz? I thought you were getting on splendidly."

"The credit must go, then, to my partner."

"Yes, the waltz, I fancy, is one of Harwood's specialities."

She wondered what the others might be, but thought she could at least name one of them—talking rather fatuously to young and not very experienced women like herself. Then the music started up again, and the loiterers around the refreshment table began to wander off in its direction. Drury finished his champagne and disposed of the glass, saying as he did so, "A much over-rated drink, champagne, don't you think? You haven't got on too well with yours—leave it if you'd rather."

She did, and let him relieve her of the glass.

"An acquired taste, doubtless," she said, smiling at him. "My knowledge of drinks is very limited still, I'm afraid."

"You've plenty of time to learn," he told her, gazing down at her from his extra inches. "Let's go back and join the revels, shall we?"

Useless now to say that she didn't dance, since he had noted the performance with Mr. Harwood, so she said instead that she had understood him to say, or to imply, that *he* didn't.

"I entertained the same misapprehension about you. What we appear to have meant is that we're not up-to-date, that the permutations and convolutions of the tango are unknown to us. But this evening there are so many 'old-fashioned' dances that I begin to suspect the tango is on the way out. I gather from Linda that there's a revival going on in old English dances, but as they're scarcely adaptable to a suburban drawing-room, the waltz, the polka and the barn-dance hold the floor this evening. Come along, let's see what we can do."

They did, they thought, rather well, but they were soon separated, this time by Euan coming to claim his dance, which he performed with considerable energy, exuding self-possession and charm in equal proportions. He must be deadly, she thought, in a law court. But at least he didn't turn the charm on and off with a tap, as Gerald Harwood did, nor pay her silly compliments and embarrass her with comments upon her reported 'cleverness'. On the contrary, he appeared to find her

distinctly amusing, or, rather, some idea of her which, somehow, somewhere, he had managed to pick up. She thought he had a very good opinion of himself, though she didn't apply to him the adjective she had mentally stuck on to Mr. Harwood. For he didn't strike her as conceited, only as amazingly sure of himself—poised, with his future carved out splendidly in front of him. He was to be numbered, she felt, among those who knew how to make life stand and deliver.

It didn't occur to her that she herself might possess something of the same quality. She had always known that she must depend upon her own efforts for achieving some measure of success in life, and although, had she thought about it, she might have allowed that, so far, she had not done too badly, she would never have discerned anything in herself to command success. Nor would it have occurred to her to compare herself, even thus negatively, with this poised, assured young man. Yet she possessed two at least of Robert Louis Stevenson's requisite qualities for success—that of hard work and a sense of adventure. She could 'dare a little and be patient', but would have been very surprised had anyone told her so. Had she thought of herself in this connection, it was only as a young woman who had a living to earn and had done her best to do it in the way she found most to her liking. Gerald Harwood's chatter of 'cleverness' was as silly as it was beside the point.

BOOK TWO

CHAPTER ONE

WHEN the war broke out Emma was not to be numbered among those confident altruists who proclaimed that it wouldn't last long—that it would all be over by Christmas. For one thing, she remembered that much the same had been said over the Boer War—and look at the way *that* had dragged on! Whoever could have believed that a war of this size would ever have been allowed to begin? Listening to Sid's cheerful prognostications, she said sharply that it was a good deal easier to start it than it would be to bring it to an end—the politicians must all have taken leave of their senses! Two thoughts only, at this stage, brought her a crumb of comfort, that at forty-six Sid was too old to fight and that Andy, in his sixteenth year, was too young. Sid would get no younger and was safe, but Andy would get older. . . .

Her heart missed a beat at the thought, for Em was not among the women who buckle on their menfolk's swords. She considered war a crime and one entirely to be blamed on the crass stupidity of men. It was a point of view in which the young Jessica heartily concurred, and this war, she said, might go on and on like the Napoleonic Wars. It was, in fact, for Emma and Jessica alike, and for a good many other people, the end of everything sane and sensible.

Yet to Emma, certainly, it had not occurred that there would be an immediate public appeal for men, and when Kitchener's posters went up in the streets she was dumbfounded.

The war both distressed and deflated Jessica. Nothing could prevent her from thinking of it as the wildest and wickedest folly, but her own ignorance of what had brought it about sent her searching for information in every direction. That England had gone to war because Germany had invaded Belgium seemed to have little connection with the murder of the heir to

the Austrian throne, which had started all the trouble; but clearly that was not the reason, either, for she happened to know that a certain publicist, under the impression that it was, had written for his paper during that brief interval before war was declared an article entitled *To Hell with Servia!* and the newsboys were running down the streets with their yellow placards before it was pointed out to the writer that if Britain went to war she would be fighting on the *side* of Servia. Clearly, she was not the only person who did not know what the war was about. She decided to try to find out.

From the articles in the Press by H. G. Wells and Arnold Bennett, she learned that this was 'a war to end war', which didn't appear to make sense, being based, as far as she could see, upon very little—that nations would be so shocked by this display of Armageddon that they would swear 'Never again'. But, as far as her history book took her, this didn't appear to have happened in the past, though you'd have thought that nearly twenty years of the Napoleonic Wars would have afforded sufficient proof of the horrors and miseries of war and of its aftermath. These two authors lost considerable 'face' with Jessica over their efforts. She turned from them to a bound volume of *Punch* for nineteen-twelve, where she discovered a cartoon of a seething pot, labelled 'Balkan Troubles', upon which the Great Powers were depicted very precariously seated in the only too obviously desperate effort to keep the lid on. There was another of a sinister figure, labelled 'Turkey', rubbing his hands gleefully at the sight of the placard 'Austria threatens Servia—European crisis', and this reminded her of something her father had said about our "having trouble before long with the Balkans—you mark my words!" But nobody had. It was her mother's habit to be amused when her father 'talked politics', especially of international affairs, in which he seemed to take considerable interest, though he must, Jessica now supposed, have taken his line of argument from the particular side of the Press he patronised. However, it had proved to be true, as he now took occasion to remind them all ("I always did say . . ."), but was entirely unable to enlighten

his young daughter as to why bad behaviour on the part of one of the Balkan States had been able to drag Europe into war, nor why we, as well as the Russians, should be helping the assassin. Nor why already, as far as the general public was concerned, the war had become an Anglo-German business. She found herself remembering a spy play she had seen in London a short time ago, of which she remembered very little save that it had been generally agreed the spies were German and the scene of their activities England. And this recollection connected up in her mind with a campaign of Lord Roberts's for 'national service', with talk of an increase in Germany's navy, and a current phrase in the English Press: 'We want eight and we won't wait'. There had been, too, the 'man in the street' grumbling about 'German competition' and another phrase, 'Made in Germany', which had been often heard; and nobody had seemed to like the Kaiser, from the King downwards, so rumour had it. But this had made her mother very scornful. Why, she said, it wasn't so long ago that people—Sid among them!—had talked the same way of the Czar and were glad when the Japs had beaten his armies. This, Jessica noticed, had her father stumped. But everything had gone on as usual until, suddenly, there was this murder in the Balkans, and England was at war with Germany. She could make no sense of it whatever.

But none of the people she met seemed to find any difficulty about the situation. Some of them shrugged their shoulders and said they'd known it must come—no indignation, no horror of modern warfare, only the determination to wipe Germany's nose in the dust. When the King spoke at the prorogation of Parliament he had said, "We are fighting for a worthy purpose and shall not lay down our arms until that purpose has been fulfilled." Jessica's ignorance was not enlightened.

She was not unaware that she was calling attention to herself in the office by her questioning attitude to the conflict, but could do nothing about it. The idea of modern warfare was horrifying and her ignorance so angered her that she began to attend meetings of protest against the war, but most of them

were so interrupted by shouts of 'Pro-Germans!' and threats and yells that, as sources of information, they were useless, and soon she ceased to go. When called a 'pacifist' she was frankly puzzled, for the word had no meaning for her, though to have accepted the label would have been an easy, if no more popular, way out. To say that the 'facts' put forward as the reason for the British Declaration of War seemed insufficient was to have the phrase 'Poor little Belgium' flung at you (which was no answer), and to say that the 'facts' didn't make sense was to stamp yourself a superior person, who knew more than the Government. She was made, in the office, to understand that she was talking of things of which she knew nothing (which she did not deny), but what other people said made it clear to her that they were in no better case. Nor did holding her tongue mend matters, since the very fact that she did not echo the phrases by which everyone seemed to be swayed made her appear a tiresome creature, who desired to call attention to herself. She was badly in need of the help of someone better informed than she or any of the people she knew; someone, too, uninfluenced by the officially-inspired Press. But at the office there was no one to fill the role.

At home she was in much the same case. Though her mother continued to lament the war as an insanity, she accepted the invasion of Belgium as the reason for our intervention, while her father still maintained that it was 'those dratted murdering Balkans' after all, without attempting to explain to the inquiring young Jessica how it came about, then, that we were on their side.

Woman's Review still functioned, although it was clear it was wrestling against heavy odds. It had already lost its sub-editress and some of its staff to the V.A.D., and many of its contributors had found other things to do which they considered more important in the circumstances than writing. But no more in the pages of the *Review* than anywhere else did she find anything to mitigate her state, since nothing that appeared in them shed any light upon her difficulties or disputed the generally accepted reasons for the war. Indeed, many of their best-known writers, who had been numbered

among those who had clamoured for the vote, now clamoured for nothing save to be allowed to take part in the war effort. For the first time in her life Jessica was definitely unhappy, unsure of herself and lonely. The lovely world of promise, in which she had sunned herself so happily for a brief while, had withered over-night.

One day, in the early spring of nineteen-fifteen when the guns were thundering at Ypres and Hill 60 was taken, Jessica arrived home to find a letter awaiting her on the dining-room mantelshelf. Opening it, she saw to her surprise that it was from Drury Hamilton, for he had never written to her before and she was unacquainted with his handwriting. Ethie, however, who had seen it several times upon prescriptions he wrote out for her, watched her sister with considerable interest as she drew out the sheet of notepaper and, with a little frown puckering her forehead, began to read it. Ethie, noticing that she did not turn the page to look at the signature before doing this, assumed that she must have recognised the handwriting and so concluded that Drury had written to her before—maybe to the office. Assumption and conclusion were both wrong, however, for Jessica, running her eye quickly over the page, had seen at once that the note occupied rather less than the whole of it and that the signature was, simply, 'Drury'.

The note announced that he was leaving for France in a few days' time and asked her, if she were free that evening, and it remained fine, to go for a short walk with him, as he would much like to see her before his departure. He would walk down to meet her about eight o'clock. If she did not come he would understand.

Understand *what*? she thought. That she didn't want to see him? That she couldn't spare time to go to say good-bye to him before he went off to the war? She was conscious of a little spasm of annoyance at his self-effacement, for after the evening of the party she had felt that at last they had established their youthful association upon a reasonably adult basis, that at last it had really become a friendship. But the war had followed so hard upon its heels that little had come of it, for

they had met only once since and Drury had been hastening to answer an urgent call from an elderly patient of his father's. So now, as she read the note, it seemed as if they had put off their new ease of manner with their party clothes.

So much was she occupied with these thoughts that she did not observe the little smirk of amusement which twisted Ethie's mouth as she watched her quietly munching the toast and sipping the tea which Emma, as usual, had placed before her as a stay until supper-time, and making but few observations as she did so. Nobody expected more of her at this stage. Like her father, when she reached home she wanted to be left alone with her tray and the evening paper for a while. Sid was still deep in his. A busy day and a tiring journey home in a crowded railway compartment had the same effect upon them both—they were not disposed to be chatty. Since the war began, however, Jessica had grown much less so at any time of the day, but this evening Ethie had a piece of gossip to impart. She said, "I heard to-day that Linda Hamilton's training with the Red Cross, and Old Mustard Stockings is joining up."

It was some time now since Euan had started to read law, but Ethie was not to be parted from her inelegant description of him as a schoolboy.

"As usual, you appear to know all the local gossip," Jessica commented, putting down the paper as if she could not bear to read any more of what was in it. And as if she did not, either, want to hear any more of her sister's talk, she picked up the tray and carried it out into the kitchen, despite her mother's protests.

"Sit down, Jess, you've done enough for to-day—they can wait for the supper things. Go and sit down in the garden and get a breath of fresh air."

But Jessica finished the washing and putting away of the crockery and reached the garden undisturbed, via the kitchen door. Meantime Ethie had remarked, "That was a letter from Drury Hamilton—I s'pose she thinks we don't know."

"I don't suppose," said Emma calmly, "that Jess thinks anything of the kind. It's like your impudence, miss, to examine a letter addressed to your sister."

"I didn't—I just happened to know the writing, that's all; just as I do of those two Johnnies she goes out with in town. Or did before the war started. I haven't seen anything from them for a goodish time now."

Pause. Then, "I wonder if it's true about Drury going to the war, too? I heard it was all settled. His father, poor old thing, will have enough to do."

"I've no doubt he will arrange matters satisfactorily without your needing to worry," said Emma, not looking up from her crochet.

"I s'pose the letter was to tell her about it—or to say good-bye," Ethie offered.

Emma made no reply. Sid, immersed in the war news, gave no sign that he had heard any of this conversation.

Jessica came in from the garden after a while and said that she would shortly be going out for a walk. She would not be late, but they were not to wait supper for her, after which statement she went up to the room which, since Andy's departure to the farm and Ethie's occupancy of his room, she now had to herself.

Half an hour later they heard the front door shut quietly behind her.

"I bet she's gone to meet him," said Ethie. "Fond farewell, I shouldn't wonder."

"Keep your silly thoughts to yourself, Ethie, do," said Emma. "Dr. Hamilton has been a friend of Jess's for years. It's quite natural, if he is going to the Front, that they should wish to say good-bye."

"That's what I said . . ."

As Jessica turned into the Fairhill Road, Drury was just approaching the corner. They smiled at each other and agreed it was a pleasant evening. Pleasant enough to walk across the Common, did she think? She did. He turned and they got into step and went briskly up the slight slope of Fairhill Road. He had said a 'walk', not a 'stroll', for he had never seen Jessica 'stroll' and was not himself addicted to that style of pedestrian

exercise. They looked, as usual, as they went, as if they had a goal to reach. They called it 'The Common', but when they reached it they still strode on, talking as they delivered themselves up to the embrace of the soft, warm evening.

Very much to her surprise, although they talked of the war it did not make her feel unhappy as such conversations usually did—indeed, for that brief space of time she felt a lessening of the despondency in which she had lived ever since the war began. For Drury did not utter the usual clichés about it nor *strafe* the enemy. He thought it, he said, a very bad business and a crime that it should ever have been allowed to begin. No quarrel between nations was worth the loss of a single human life. Neither did he discuss the generally accepted reason for the war—he merely asserted that it was most unlikely to be the right one. The common people of the nations, who must do the fighting and suffering, never knew from what roots our wars sprang; they fought in quarrels not their own, only too prone to accept unquestioningly what they were told.

"It's a bad business and reflects no credit upon our Government, or any other concerned in it. A European war at this time of day is an acknowledgment of the complete failure of government. It will smash the world we've grown up in, and I find it hard to believe that we shall find ourselves in a better one. We shall learn a great deal, I've no doubt, about guns and aeroplanes and how to kill people more horribly. I see nothing whatever to put on the credit side. But I'm a doctor, and the rights and wrongs of the conflict must, with me, take second place. Have you any plans of your own?"

"None—beyond staying on with the *Review*, as long as it lasts," she told him.

"Does it show signs of giving up the ghost?"

"I'm afraid so. Paper difficulties, loss of staff and contributors, and, I fear, loss of readers. I'm not in favour, I'm afraid, either. I don't understand why a murder in the Balkans should affect *us*, much less result in a world war, and so far I've not met anybody who can explain it. Everyone talks about Germany and Belgium, and I'm asked if I think I know more than the Government and I say no, but that I wish I knew as

much. When I'm told, for the hundredth time, that this is a war to end war, I ask how and why. If I believed that it was, I'd look for war-work to-morrow, I think, for that would at least seem a worthy object. But I don't believe it, and the arguments of Messrs. Wells and Bennett and the rest do nothing for me. For clever men, they do, it seems to me, say some very silly things."

"They're busy at the Ministry of Information churning out nicely-written dope," said Drury. "They write for people who can't or won't think . . . or can do neither any longer. 'A war to end war' is just one of the many phrases running around. It means nothing—no war could ever conceivably end war. It can only end in fresh grievances and hatreds, and these, in their turn, must lead to new and bigger wars. Words to-day mean anything or nothing. They are more dangerous than usual, which is saying a good deal, though I don't expect you to agree with me."

"I think I do, though," said Jessica. "I'm beginning to wish I was deaf and had never learned to read."

By this time they had circled the Common and now struck back across the main path. The nearly full moon made it all as bright as daylight, and this Jessica regretted, since it was so difficult to pretend that the embracing couples on the seats, on the grass, under the trees, were not really there. She found them very embarrassing, but Drury talked on calmly enough, as if he hadn't noticed them.

"At the moment the phrase-makers are on top. People seem not only to believe that great issues are at stake—as they are!—but that they can be settled by this gigantic war."

"Right and wrong, you mean?"

"And justice against oppression. Truth against falsehood. A struggle against a ruthless enemy. But the enemy is Man, not the Devil. Man fights himself alone—but does not know it."

"Who do you believe is the villain of the piece? Germany, as we are told, or Serbia, as it seems we now have to call it?"

Drury said, "Neither. An entity called 'The Sovereign State', for which man is content, at short intervals through the

centuries, to lay down his life—as well as to suffer (and inflict) most terrible cruelties. What was it Cavour said about this business of patriotism? Something to the effect that what they did for Italy they would be ashamed to do for any other reason.”

To Jessica this seemed a tremendous answer. Patriotism defined as a gigantic obsession which defied reason, common sense and morality. Nor had she before heard of the Sovereign State as the head and front of the offending. She walked on in silence, and when the conversation was resumed it took a sudden personal turn, as if along that of the war they could get no farther. She heard confirmation of Ethie’s statement that Linda was working with the Red Cross, but not, Drury thought, liking it very much. A bad choice, he thought. His father had at last managed to get some assistance with his practice—“otherwise I fear I couldn’t have got away.” And Euan was training for a commission.

Jessica said that she found it impossible to imagine Euan in the war. At least, not the Euan she had met at the party, but perhaps there was another Euan she hadn’t met?

“No—he’s all of a piece,” Drury assured her. “It’s the same Euan whom you met at the party who will go to the war. You see, he wouldn’t agree with anything we’ve been saying this evening. He accepts war as a kind of recurring decimal in human existence. It will be a nuisance to throw up the profession he’s so fond of for a time, but he wouldn’t like not to be in it.”

It was at her gate that he said, “Will you do something for me, Jessica?”

“If I can—of course.”

“Then will you try to find time to look in occasionally upon my mother? With all three of us gone she will be feeling very bereft. My father, too, of course, but he will have his work, too much of it, I’m afraid, despite the help he’s managed to get.”

“Do you think she would like that?”

“I’m quite sure she would.”

“Then of course I will. Good-bye, and good luck—and thank you for the walk and coming to say good-bye.”

He smiled at her and kept the hand she had offered him within his own as he said, "Did you think I would go off to the war *without* saying good-bye to you?"

As she had never seriously considered the possibility of his being free to go off to the war, despite the rumours Ethie had so often repeated, she hesitated to answer this, but was annoyed to find herself remembering that young woman's recent comment, "I s'pose we shall be having your admirer coming in soon to say good-bye to you."

"Come, now, tell the truth and shame the devil," Drury encouraged her, whereupon she said, "Well, I think I should have been surprised if you had."

"Only 'surprised'?"

He smiled down upon her, making her feel absurdly like the little girl he had rescued from the toughs with the football.

"I should have thought it—unkind."

"And been a little hurt?"

"I—I suppose so."

"Quite determined to-night, aren't you, to be mistress of the understatement? You would have been 'surprised'—not even 'very surprised'. And you don't 'know', you only 'think' and 'suppose'. A sad misuse of words for one so fond of them."

Embarrassed, suddenly at a loss for words of any sort, she said, "I must go. . . . Thank you for the walk and the talk. . . . Good-bye, and the best of luck."

"Let us make it *au revoir*, shall we?" He released her hand, pushed the gate back and stood there while she walked up to the door and fitted the key in the lock. In the act of turning it, she looked back.

"Good-bye," she called softly.

Drury doffed his hat and was gone without a word.

Her belated '*Au revoir*' fell softly into the empty air.

"Well, had a pleasant time?" asked Ethie, with a smirk, as Jessica took her seat at the supper table.

"Yes, thank you," Jessica said calmly, and suddenly thought how very satisfactory it would be to smack her sister's smiling face. For she had suddenly become aware that it was Ethie's

smirks and everlasting hints of romance which, as she had grown up, had made her so self-conscious with Drury Hamilton. Except for the early part of this evening and that enchanted occasion of the dance in some other world, she knew of no exceptions to this generalisation. And now, at the close of a most satisfactory meeting, Drury must needs take a leaf out of her sister's book!

However, as trying day succeeded trying day, she became aware that the impersonal part of the conversation with Drury had equipped her with a little armour, vulnerable certainly, at the moment, but serviceable. What she wanted now was knowledge, a battery of facts to oppose to those who accepted phrases instead and yielded themselves, passive victims, to the momentum of mass suggestion.

CHAPTER TWO

IT was a few weeks later that the office boy brought in a card to her upon which she read the name, Gerald Harwood, and sat thinking for a moment where she had heard it before. Of course, at Linda's party. In some other world. . . .

"Show him up in five minutes' time, please, Gray," she said, and laid the card down upon her desk. Mr. Harwood, she noticed, lived at Richmond.

There was no reason why she should keep him waiting, but she felt it would do him good, for if she might have forgotten the name she remembered the owner. Tall, dark, with a manner, so self-assured as to appear slightly insolent, a pleasing voice which uttered little but inanities and remarks so tiresomely personal as to bring the hot colour to her face, which had caused Mr. Harwood to become even more tiresome and personal.

How silly it all seemed now--and how very much something which had happened in some other world. Luckily in this one she did not blush so easily! She could not suppose that Mr.

Harwood had called upon her for the purpose of renewing so tenuous an acquaintance. However, no other reason had occurred to her by the time the door opened and Gray announced, "Mr. Harwood, please, miss."

Invited to sit down, Gerald Harwood did so and lost no time in stating the reason for his call, which was the one she had dismissed as highly unlikely. Finding himself in the neighbourhood of the *Review* office, he could not resist the idea of looking in upon her and renewing their acquaintance. (Really, *too* fatuous! thought Jessica.) She murmured something polite and left the next move to him.

"I saw that it was close upon one o'clock and wondered if you would be free to have lunch with me."

She had no desire to have lunch with him and was obliquely amused at the form of words. Not 'if you would care', which would have connoted the fact that she might not, but 'if you are free', which considered only the alternative of her having a prior engagement. She was, in fact, quite free, as was usual these days, but equally free from any desire to take the meal with Gerald Harwood and have (doubtless) to listen to the comments upon the war to which she had become so painfully used. But it was easier to say, "Well, thank you . . ." than to think up quickly enough a likely excuse. So she said it, and after a short interval found herself sitting opposite Gerald Harwood in a corner of a nearby hotel and wondering why he was free to look casually in upon young females and invite them to lunch; but that was an inquiry she would make of no young man. She hoped, a little desperately, that they would not talk of the war, but it was only a few days since the sinking of the *Lusitania* and the mobbing of the unfortunate London shopkeepers who had German-looking names, while the reports of gas-attacks in France had raised the appalling question of retaliation. It was seldom possible, these days, to evade talk of the war, however much you might desire it. Whatever topic you started, before long you always found it was the war you were talking about.

So to-day; but it was Harwood who brought her to it by asking how the *Review* was standing up to the situation.

"Badly," she said, "all the enthusiasm and ambition for it seem to have disappeared. The people whose special 'toy' it was have all gone off to the war and so have many of our contributors. Our sub-editress has joined the V.A.D. and I've taken over her job as well as my own. Soon, I've no doubt, I shall be looking for another."

"You won't be getting into uniform?"

She shook her head.

"I don't know what the war's about—or what has caused it. Nothing I hear or read seems to me to make sense, but when I say so I'm considered a superior person, which is not in the very least what I feel."

"Well, everyone can't go to the war. The ordinary business of life has to be carried on somehow, you know."

"Yes, and if the work I'm doing was useful perhaps I should feel happier, or, at least, not so redundant. But it isn't useful any longer. The paper's already moribund—the matters it set out to deal with are all shelved for 'the duration'. But it's my complete inability to understand why we're *in* this awful war that really gets me down. To me it seems only a tale told by an idiot! None of it makes sense."

"In a way, it makes only too *much* sense."

She stared at him.

"How? A youth in a little Balkan town murders the heir to the Austrian throne. Austria makes certain demands upon Serbia, to which she replies. Austria is not satisfied, declares war and bombards Belgrade. To any ordinary person this would appear to make the war an Austro-Serbian matter. Instead of that we have a European war on our hands, with Germany, so far as we are concerned, the arch-villain."

"You are letting your soup congeal, you know. Germany, it is held in some quarters, could have procured a better attitude to Serbia upon Austria's part if she had chosen—that may or may not be so. Others blame Berchtold, Austria's Foreign Minister. For the rest, Europe has for a long while been divided into two hostile camps—the Triple Alliance (Germany, Italy and Austria-Hungary), and the Franco-Russian. Into the latter Great Britain is drawn by something

we used to call—Heaven help us!—the *Entente Cordiale*, which, in effect, turns out to be a military alliance.”

Jessica was silent for a moment as if working that statement out. “I see—all the groups just fell into place. But had Belgium nothing to do with it at all?”

“Nothing, except that she was in the way, and therefore the predestined victim of war between France and Germany, since Germany could only attack France through Belgium or wait for France to attack her. There could never have been any serious doubt as to which course would be pursued. And, although nobody seems to have noticed it, Sir Edward Grey, when asked in the House if we would remain neutral if, in fact, Germany did *not* invade Belgium, refused to give such an assurance. But question and answer stand in Hansard.”

“But hadn’t we, as well as France and Germany, guaranteed Belgian neutrality? Or is that a myth also?”

“Oh yes, we had, but the Treaty was a very old one—moribund, I should say. All the same, if from the outset we had made it clear, as was done in 1875, that we should most strongly oppose any such infringement in the eventuality of a European war, it is at least probable that Germany would have refrained. There seems no doubt that she did not believe we should intervene.”

“And is it because of Belgium and the German invasion that for us the war has become an Anglo-German affair?”

“For the man in the street, at any rate. Belgium’s fate is something we all deplore, though, all the same, I often feel that the invasion must have been a god-send to the Foreign Office! But so far as ordinary folk are concerned, their view of Germany has been coloured by the long-standing trade rivalry between that country and ourselves. And, too, over this rivalry between the two navies.”

“‘We want eight and we won’t wait’. It would seem that, as a nation, we’ve never liked the Germans. Not even the Prince Consort, despite all he did for England.”

“In addition to keeping the young Victoria in order?” Gerald Harwood smiled. “No, he certainly never had his deserts,” he agreed. “And he worked himself to death.”

"And then," said Jessica, pursuing her own line of thought, "there was King Edward. He doesn't appear to have liked his nephew, the Kaiser, very much."

"But he did like the French, or, at least, their way of life. The French, however, didn't like *us*. In fact, in the early part of this century we were unpopular everywhere in Europe. As Prince of Wales, King Edward set out to do something about it. He made friends with Italy, with Austria, with France and with Russia. (Also with the Irish!) They called him the Uncle of Europe and it was considered a feather in his cap that he helped to bring about the *Entente Cordiale*."

"But Germany was not among the favoured?"

"Germany was being very watchful. She didn't regard the Prince as a benevolent uncle but as a mischief-maker on a considerable scale. The *Entente* hadn't pleased her at all."

"Does it mean, then, that if we are friends with France we cannot be with Germany?"

"That's quite a question. It's said that King Edward always believed that together Germany and England could have kept the peace in Europe and that the vagaries of the Kaiser made such an alliance impossible. Maybe. However, Morocco was the final blow to any such arrangement."

"Morocco?" Jessica looked blank. "Whatever had Morocco to do with it?"

The waiter removed the remains of her cold soup and handed her a menu, at which she glanced hastily and ordered the meat dish which she thought she could eat with the least disrelish.

"Do go on, please," she said to Gerald Harwood, as he made his choice and handed back the menu. "What will you drink?" he asked her.

"Nothing, thank you."

"You won't change your mind? Quite sure?"

She was quite sure; he ordered himself a Bass, and with a smile moved the water-jug nearer to her hand. The waiter returned, placed the ordered food in front of them, helped them to vegetables and departed.

"Morocco," said Jessica. "How does that come into the picture?"

"Because a quarter of a century earlier France, Germany, Spain and ourselves had signed a Treaty (at Madrid) for commercial rights in that (then) semi-barbarous country's development. Each undertook to respect its integrity and that of the Sultan and each was to have equal trading facilities. Was geography one of your 'good' subjects at school?"

"I think I may claim as much."

"Then you will understand why, apart from commercial interests, we had a special concern in the development of Morocco."

"Gibraltar?"

"Full marks. For some years the terms of the agreement seem to have been kept by all parties, but at the turn of the century it became clear that this was so no longer. It's a lengthy story, but, briefly, it came to the knowledge of our Foreign Office that France was bent on acquiring a North African Empire—indeed, had already obtained control in Tunis, which had nearly landed her in a war with Italy. She had also strongly opposed certain reforms our Government was urging upon the Sultan. Germany had supported us there, and had made considerable progress with the development of her trade. She had also negotiated a Commercial Treaty with the Sultan, through her Consul at Fez, and seems to have acted perfectly correctly, her Government not ratifying the Treaty until the signatory Powers to the Treaty of Madrid had approved.

"Elsewhere things were not so satisfactory. French and Italian Imperialism had joined hands. Italy might do this or that, provided she would turn a blind eye to France's ambitions elsewhere—though, to be sure, Jaurès used a stronger term for it, when he spoke just before the war started. He said, 'You can steal at one end of the street since I have stolen at the other.' "

"Was that why he was assassinated?"

"And for all the other unpalatable truths he and his Party—he was a Socialist—had been telling his country for some time."

"With a war coming, you mean, he'd have been a considerable embarrassment to the Government?"

"Yes, but we're anticipating. We are still at the beginning of the twentieth-century. Nineteen-four, to be precise. Ten years to go. And France and England have decided to bury the hatchet and to become friends—much to the relief, doubtless, of the French and English people, who must have been sick to death of the everlasting quarrels of their Governments which so often had brought them to the brink of war. Meantime, the Uncle of Europe had prepared the way for the Anglo-French Convention, to which, apparently, Germany took no exception, but objected very strongly some six months later to a further arrangement—this time between France and Spain—and began to suspect that she was being elbowed out of Morocco altogether."

"None of this," said Jessica, "seems to have been in my history book."

"Nor in mine. But it isn't history you learn at school, you know—but a long list of Kings and Queens and a longer list of battles in wars of which you are told very little and most of it inaccurate. You're not doing very well with that steak-pie, are you?"

"I never do very well with meat. I've eaten all the vegetables."

"Well, what else will you have?"

"Nothing, thank you."

"But you've eaten 'nothing' already. It's a most unsubstantial diet." He handed her the menu and told her to think again. She said she would have an ice.

"It will be very pseudo, I'm afraid. Condensed milk for certain. Ices are on their way out."

However, Jessica decided to chance that. The ice was brought and, very 'pseudo', was allowed to begin the process of disintegration in its dish until Gerald called her attention to it.

"What happened next?" she asked.

"The Kaiser went to Tangier and the Uncle of Europe found he had a rival in the field, for the upshot of it was that our politicians decided that France was not a very satisfactory partner in international politics, and that we should look elsewhere. We looked, of course, to Russia. So, incidentally, did Germany."

"And in Morocco?"

"Another Conference was held at Algeciras and a Treaty signed, after Germany had made it clear that as one of the signatory Powers at Madrid she had equal rights in Morocco's development and no intention of being done out of them. We are now in nineteen-six—when you were probably learning your alphabet."

"In nineteen-six," she told him severely, "I was in my twelfth year."

"Were you, indeed?" He smiled at her as if it amused him to have an attractive young woman making him a present of her age. Or did she, perhaps, only mean to tell him not to be ridiculous? She did, indeed. For here again, she thought, is the tiresome Mr. Harwood of the party night. What she wanted of him was information, not silly compliments.

"And what happened after Algeciras?"

"The virtual tearing up of the Treaty, the steady absorption and occupation of Morocco by the French, and finally the occupation of Fez—'relief' was the word used, I believe. The German answer to this was to send a gunboat to Agadir, a god-forsaken spot on the coast. By the time it arrived there were a hundred thousand French and Spanish troops in Morocco."

"And how much of her guaranteed independence?"

"Very little. The French Imperialists carried the day, for with a succession of short-lived Governments the French Chamber was helpless."

"But what had we got out of the business?"

"In Morocco, nothing. We hadn't wanted anything, but as part of our agreement with France we had supported her intrigues, and in return had resolved with her one of our outstanding squabbles—that of Egypt. What the people of England didn't know was that our agreement with France had these secret clauses attached to it. Then suddenly, in the summer of nineteen-eleven, we found ourselves on the brink of war with Germany."

"I remember something of that. It was very hot weather, and I was nearing the end of my last term at school, so it must have

been July. Everybody was denouncing Germany and the Kaiser—my father and his friends among them. But I never gleaned the faintest idea what it was about. Didn't Lloyd George make a speech somewhere?"

"Yes, at the Mansion House, though it wasn't his job—he wasn't the Minister for Foreign Affairs. But he was the man to make the sort of speech the Foreign Office needed—you wouldn't have learned from it what the row was about. However, wiser counsels prevailed. Nobody wanted war, and the situation was saved. But the harm was done. From then on, Germany regarded our friendship with France with the greatest suspicion and believed herself the victim of an isolationist conspiracy. The dragon's teeth had been sown and from that time the German military party gained in strength, for an alliance with Russia, by which Germany had hoped to offset the *Entente*, came to nothing, and the *Entente* remained. Moreover, Russia was clearly moving nearer to us and to France."

"Why was Germany afraid of Russia?"

"Because Russia and France and an unfriendly Britain would tilt the Balance of Power against her. Strategically, Germany was vulnerable, and Russia, with her expansionist policy, a menace. Now that Russia is on our side in the Balance of Power that has ruled Europe for so long, it has become convenient to dismiss Germany's fears and to pooh-pooh the Russian scare. We've forgotten—and probably our generation doesn't know—that for the best part of half a century it was fear of Russia which governed our own foreign policy."

"And now the steamroller's on our side?"

"Much good may it do us. Russia is a bogey, but I'm not so sure that she'll prove much of a fighting ally. Why should the Russian serfs fight their Czar's battles?"

"Their country, I suppose, right or wrong. . . . There's one thing I still don't understand—the enmity between Serbia and Austria."

"Well, there was the Bosnia annexation of—1908, I think—to which, unfortunately, Germany gave her support, and it seems

that Serbian ambitions aimed at dismembering the Austrian Empire—but Russia, of course, comes into that also.”

“Coffee, sir? Madam?”

Coffee was brought. Over it, having refused a cigarette (“I don’t smoke”), Jessica asked Gerald Harwood how he came to be so well informed about foreign affairs.

“I wouldn’t put it as high as that. The story of Morocco has already been told in print, though I’ve met few people who have read it. For the rest, from my youth upwards I’ve always heard much talk about ourselves, France and Germany because my father, in addition to choosing a French wife, had a business partnership with a brother in France, and there was consequently much coming and going. The brothers, too, were great correspondents. They liked the French way of life, but did not approve of the *Entente* and always said that some day it would land us in trouble, that we had nothing in common with the French and that our natural association was with the Germans.”

“That must have annoyed your mother,” said Jessica.

“She was used to such arguments, and she could answer back, I assure you. Moreover, she forgave them because it was only France’s politicians they disliked, not *la belle France* or the French. In particular, my father much mistrusted Delcassé and what he called his ‘bunch of Imperialists at the French Foreign Office’. However, with Delcassé dismissed and the Algeciras Treaty signed, he had been inclined to hopefulness. Moreover, with the Liberals in power and Sir Edward Grey at the Foreign Office, he came to believe that we were safe. He died before he was completely undeceived, though nineteen-eleven was a bad shock to him.”

“It would appear,” Jessica offered, “that diplomacy is the villain of the piece. Couldn’t it be given an airing? If it wasn’t ‘secret’ and ordinary people knew what they were committed to, couldn’t they perhaps have some say in the matter? As things are, our Governments may—and apparently do!—commit us to anything, it seems.”

“A cynic you know, has said that the essence of diplomacy is that you never speak the truth. I fancy he meant never *tell* it,

either—even when you knew the other side was cheating. But we all seem to have accepted the fact that the field of foreign politics is sacrosanct.” He smiled at her and added, “But where would all our ‘spy’ novelists be if everything in the field of international politics was open and above-board?”

“In Ruritania, surely—where they can create their own brand of diplomacy. Do you mind if I ask you a personal question?”

“Not in the least.”

“Well then—you are still a civilian. Does that mean work of national importance?”

“So it is considered. I’m a Civil Servant.”

She smiled.

“You don’t wear the armlet. How do you circumvent the White Feather army?”

“I don’t. I smile upon its minions.”

(Mr. Harwood of the party night again.)

She said, “Forgive the catechism, but—would you, if you were released, join one of the fighting services?”

“Certainly.”

“No moral—or religious—scruples?”

“Plenty of moral ones. As for religious, well, organised Christianity is almost solidly behind the war. It’s become a Christian duty to take part in it. Only the Quakers are logical and practise, here, what they preach. But I’m not a Quaker nor a practising member of any religious community. My infant baptism is my only connecting link with the Established Church.”

“But you think war wrong?”

“Even worse—senseless—a crime against humanity and the very negation of statesmanship. The world’s ulcer, in fact, that kills off the flower of generation after generation. It’s hardly thirteen years since the ending of the Boer War, which was won at the cost, on our side alone, of twenty thousand lives and more than two hundred millions in money. But if the men who went off to the war had known what it was all about they’d probably have stopped at home.”

“I wonder! Do you know, I sometimes feel that some of the

young men who go off to this war don't seem to be very unhappy about it. There's a kind of—enchantment—about them, as if they were escaping from ordinary existence which they found very dull. But I find it very difficult to understand why a declaration of war isn't the signal for a revolution."

"The English don't have revolutions, which, incidentally, are often as bad as, or worse than, wars."

"They are at least self-contained."

"I don't know that I would grant that, and they're every bit as inconclusive," said Gerald Harwood, looking at his watch. "By the way, may I give you a little bit of advice? The angle from which we've been discussing the war is accepted by very few people. Even many of those who, when war only threatened, went some part of the way with us are now engaged in convincing themselves that as a country we have had no part in bringing about the atmosphere in which the war was bred. So I should advise a little discretion."

"I'll remember—but I'm afraid I'm rather an argumentative person."

"Go and hear *other people* argue. People like Mrs. Swanwick of the Woman's Freedom League, and Brailsford. I think he put his finger on the truth when he said that this for us is a struggle between Germany and France, and for the Germans a Russo-German affair. None of the speakers will be shouting for the cessation of hostilities—they're realists. They know that all they can hope to do now is to keep truth alive and to encourage the more reasonable elements in our own and the other belligerent countries. But remember not on any account to look round at interrupters. Sit as if you were stone-deaf. And now, if I can catch the waiter's eye, I must be off."

This done and the bill presented, she drew on her gloves as Gerald Harwood put down the notes which now did duty for gold.

"It never seems like money to me," she remarked.

"It's the only kind we're likely to see in our lifetime."

"That's a depressing thought. Paper money, getting dirtier and dirtier, smelling of fish and worse, falling to pieces . . ."

Gerald laughed.

"Last year the first pound note issued was sold and re-sold for the benefit of the Red Cross," he told her, "and finally produced two hundred and fifty pounds."

He walked back to the office with her and on taking his leave said, "This has been very pleasant—we must do it again. Let me know what happens to you if the paper dies on you. Give me a ring."

She didn't say she would; indeed, it was the last thing she could imagine herself doing, but she murmured the usual polite phrases, smiled and went in through the door the hall porter was holding open for her.

During the next few days she found that this encounter had raised her spirits considerably, though leaving her with a nice problem in psychology—the reconciling of the tiresome man she had met at Linda's party with the one with whom she had lunched, and who had been the first to talk to her seriously about the war instead of trotting out all the familiar, unconvincing reasons, excuses and arguments as did everyone else she met—a generalisation from which she hastily exempted Drury Hamilton. But with him she had talked of *War* rather than of *the* war, whereas Gerald Harwood had given her an account of its origins in something euphemistically called the Balance of Power which, breeding fear in all the countries concerned, had been able to topple them all into the war over a squabble in the Balkans. For this she almost forgave him the masculine silliness which caused him to pay her a fatuous compliment in the middle of a serious conversation. Apparently, even at this time of day, if you were feminine gender and possessed a modicum of intelligence, you must either squint or knock out a front tooth to be free of it.

Nevertheless, Gerald Harwood's knowledge and his willingness to impart it disposed her to qualify, if not to overlook, this lapse, since he had at least considered her worth enlightenment—if for no better reason than that she had trailed her ignorance so shamelessly. For, although she was not aware of it, she would at this age have felt well-disposed to the Devil himself had he appeared and done as much for her.

CHAPTER THREE

WHEN Jessica had announced at home the highly probable closing down of the *Review*, Emma had exclaimed, "Oh, Jess! what did I say!" but when it really happened she did not consider the situation called for undue anxiety, since with so many women on war service even Emma felt that there would be no difficulty about her securing another post, though not, perhaps, on a paper.

Jessica, however, had made up her mind not to seek another such post, but to be content with any office job in which she could use her skill at the 'twin arts' of shorthand and type-writing. For the truth was that she was heartily sick of the Press, with its parrot-cry of 'war to end war', its frequent incitements to the breaking-up of meetings, the appeal to the worst elements of the country. With few exceptions there were, she decided, no papers left worth reading, and the Pankhurst sheet, *Britannia*, made her wonder why she had ever thought women likely to be saner on the subject of war than men, though when her weekly copy of *The Common Cause* arrived she gratefully acknowledged that some at least had kept their sanity, and commended her own good sense in having joined the Society whose organ the paper was. She found encouragement, too, in going to hear several of the speakers Gerald Harwood had particularly recommended to her, and though there was a certain amount of heckling at these meetings she remembered his instruction not to turn round, and even when she found herself sitting next to a most determined interrupter she forced herself not to move her head, but to sit there as if he, or she, did not exist—a form of self-discipline of which she would not have believed herself capable. It was considerably less than she had often been able to manage at the Women's Suffrage meetings.

It was towards the middle of September that she announced her intention of going down to the farm for a brief holiday before looking for another post, if her grandparents could have

her, about which she had little doubt, despite the fact that under present circumstances they must be very busy. However, in the interval—just over four years—since she had last been at the farm at the end of her schooldays, the younger of Sid's two bachelor brothers had taken a wife, much to the satisfaction, it appeared, of the old people, who had long complained that whereas Sid had been in too much of a hurry to marry, his brothers were hopeless laggards in the matrimonial stakes. Grandmother Bond had later written to say that the marriage was turning out very well indeed, though they'd been alarmed at first to hear that the young woman had 'taught school' in Gainsborough. But she had proved as good at the work in a farmhouse as she'd been 'at her books'. So now Jessica looked forward to meeting her, and wondered what subject she had taught, and if she knew her county well and cared for its historical associations. It would be exciting, if so, to talk with her about places and odds and ends of the local history which everyone else at the farm took for granted.

Jessica was tired and a little dispirited, but not at all disturbed by her mother's suggestion that it wasn't 'much of a time' to go into the country, much less to go walking miles to look at some old ruin or at a house where some writer or other had been born. For Emma never thought it 'much of a time' to go into the country, and at the moment did not think it much of a time to go anywhere. Ever since Andy had shattered her by announcing his intention of joining up as soon as he was old enough, the war for Emma had surged to her very front door; and although Sid, with his usual common sense, had decreed that Andy's decision was not, at this stage, to be recognised as an actual anxiety but, more properly, to be added to what he called 'your mother's fancy worries', there hung over the house a gentle, pervasive melancholy, less yielding alas! to his exhortation to Emma to 'count her blessings' or to stop crossing unbuilt bridges than used to be the case. Jessica called her 'Mrs. Gummidge' and laughed gently at her; but she knew how she felt and that she hated the war and thought it as great a disaster as she herself did. For although Andy's decision had reduced it to the personal, she was aware that her

mother had a fundamental and profound conviction that war was a male folly which had decimated the world from the beginning of time, even if she could not tell you what this, that or the other war was about or what history *said* it was about. But who could? Jessica thought, scornfully anticipating another's opinion, that history is 'bunk'. They agreed, these two sturdy rebels, that man was a quarrelsome, belligerent animal, that history and literature were crammed with accounts of his exploits under this head. And so was the Bible, Jessica said—at least, the Old Testament was. Always in its pages places and people were for ever being 'utterly destroyed'—Jericho, for instance, in which men and women, young and old alike, were 'put to the sword'. And, too, the city of Ai, to which, so the fearful Hebrew God commanded, was done what had already been done to Jericho. So, *Joshua burnt Ai, and made it a heap for ever, even a desolation unto this day*. One should never when young be given the Old Testament to read, Jessica thought, remembering the Scripture prizes she had won in her youth, just because she could remember names and references and quote long passages from the old Prophets—and been commended for her knowledge of 'the Scriptures'. In fact, except as literature, she didn't consider it should be read at all.

"Don't say these things to your gran'parents," her mother said; "they wouldn't understand," which had made Jessica smile. She may have 'turned' when she married father, she thought, but I fancy she's never been at home in the new camp! She wouldn't care to be 'thundered at' by prophets old or new.

When she had put the best part of a hundred miles between herself and London the war also for a while seemed farther away, although at the farm she did not find, nor had expected to find, anything but the normal attitude to the conflict, save where Kate was concerned, and about it she proved to have an open, eagerly inquiring mind which rejoiced Jessica's young heart. For the rest, the official view had unquestioningly been swallowed whole, and though the old people thought it a

terrible affair to be happening 'at this time of day', they placed the responsibility for it squarely upon the shoulders of Germany and particularly upon 'that Kaiser', who'd been rattling his sabre ever since he came to the throne. But, apart from remarking that we also had our militarist party, Jessica let the statement go unchallenged, and at least her grandparents approved of her for not having rushed off to join 'this Women's Emergency Corps or whatever it is'. Except for work in the hospitals or with the Red Cross, they looked upon women's participation in the war with a very doubtful eye indeed. Women in uniform and mixed up with the Army was 'all wrong'—no good could come of it!

Despite these expressions of opinion, however, Jessica found it possible to forget the war or, at least, not to remember it all the time, for its signs were not writ large upon Fenland. Late September's coloured banners waved over it when she arrived, and the harvest was nearly gathered. The bright-red farm wagons in the fields, laden with ripe corn, the placid horses moving up and down so quietly and patiently, revived for her an old memory of childhood holidays on the farm, and gave back to her in some part, at least, the old joy in the mere fact of being alive. With the harvest safely garnered, there settled down upon the farm that air of quiet satisfaction which always followed upon this yearly race with what her grandfather called 'the elements'. Impossible not to share in this sense of achievement, not to be drawn back to normality by the sight of the late coloured fruit hanging in the orchard. War or no war, there it hung, like Milton's *unfading flower of Paradise*. Down here on the farm all things in order stood, and beyond and all around, touched with the first gold of the year, lay Fenland, seeming, beneath the great arc of the Lincolnshire sky, to be dreaming of summer that was past. Soft clouds, flying sunlight and shadow, the shining, rich dark earth, the silver reflections after rain, the swallows, so reluctant to depart, flying low in the sky, flying between darkness and light—all shed abroad an atmosphere of peace. Autumn had come—but 'like spring returned'.

In this charming landscape Kate found time to wander abroad with her young niece, much to Jessica's satisfaction, for,

wonder of wonders, Kate had not only 'taught school', she had taught English. Jessica asked her how on earth she had come to marry a farmer, and, since she had lived as far away as Gainsborough, how, for that matter, had she and Tom ever come to meet?

"Oh, he was in Gainsborough on business," Kate said—"at least, in the first instance. Later, it seemed that he came for nothing whatever but to ask me to marry him." She laughed. "He wouldn't take 'no' for an answer. When I persisted in saying it, he knocked me over the head and married me before I recovered."

Jessica laughed too. It was clear that Tom Bond knew his own mind, and had an eye for what her grandfather called a 'proper woman'. And equally clear, so Jessica thought, that neither Tom nor Kate had ever had anything but joy of the result.

"Tell me about Gainsborough," she invited Kate one day as they walked together in to Bourne. "I suppose it isn't now in the least as it was described by George Eliot in *The Mill on the Floss*? I wish she hadn't called it St. Oggs, though. It's an ugly name, don't you think?"

"She did better with the Floss for the Trent, I think. I'm afraid she'd find both town and river changed out of all knowledge if she could come back and see them to-day."

"She made it sound very attractive. I've always remembered the beginning of the book where she describes the aged fluted red roofs of the houses by the old mill and the black ships carrying fir-planks and the 'bright glitter of coal', and, I suppose, too, corn from the Lincolnshire farms. Did that all stop with the coming of the railways?"

"More or less, but it must have been fast declining when George Eliot was there. She wasn't a Lincolnshire woman, you know—she belonged to Warwickshire, and was spending a holiday at Gainsborough in the September of 'sixty-nine, when she must have been enjoying the success of *Adam Bede* and planning *The Mill*. And by that time, of course, the railways were a going concern. Inland waterways in England, unfortunately, are everywhere neglected. If something was done

about this, Gainsborough might regain its place as a useful port—or begin, even, to build ships again. But now she makes machinery for farming—ploughs, harrows, threshing machines.”

“And the river—that’s altered too?”

“Yes, the Floss, running between George Eliot’s ‘green banks’, is no more. As the Trent it is tamed and runs now between stone embankments.”

“And poor Tom and Maggie Tulliver couldn’t be drowned by its flooding now?”

“Very unlikely. But you never know with rivers in this sort of country. Even the ‘smallest, most innocent-looking ones, given the right conditions, can turn into raging torrents within the hour.”

It was Kate, too, who supported her over her interest in Croyland and other places her grandparents took for granted. When as a schoolgirl she had talked of ‘The Wake’, and Croyland, and places they had known all their lives, they were a little flattered, perhaps, but certainly amused by her enthusiasm. A fine place once, they said of Croyland Abbey and asked her why she didn’t call it ‘Crowland’ the way everyone else did—it was that way on the signposts. She didn’t know, but it was spelt ‘Croyland’ in Kingsley’s novel, and she thought Kingsley would have known. But now she had a strong ally in Tom’s wife. It was Kate who told her that Croyland was correct—that it came from *cru*, which meant ‘soft’ or ‘muddy’ ground, and had nothing whatever to do with the crows that nested in the old abbey. The spelling *Crowland*, she said, had only appeared after the Dissolution. Which opened up another historical vista for their inspection, since Henry VIII and Cromwell between them were responsible for the ruin of the lovely ancient place. Henry, said Kate, had destroyed much of it when he reformed the Church (neither of them liked Henry very much, and this was another intriguing topic), and in the Civil War Cromwell had bombarded what remained because the Royalists had fortified it. Cromwell, Kate said, was a well-to-do Fenlander and so it was harder to forgive him than the abominable Henry.

Observing their warm agreement on this and what he called 'associated matters', Andy could understand Kate's interest in all such, for she had been a teacher; but Jess? Why was it these old authors and their characters made Lincolnshire so absorbingly interesting for *her*? Maybe she'd act the same way in any county in which she found herself? But at least he recognised it as the equivalent of his own more practical interest in this county upon which, in their own first youth, his parents had turned their backs.

He saw, too, that Jessica was already much happier than when she had arrived. The look of strain had gone from her young face. She thought now of other things beside the war; had forgotten, at least temporarily, that it had cut sharply away from the work she had enjoyed and left her, as he put it to himself, 'high and dry'. And this was very true. But there was something else which he knew without being able to reduce it to concrete thought or any form of words. Jessica, however, could have done it for him. She knew that it wasn't only a return to a countryside which she had loved (as he had) from the first moment she had seen it that had wrought the change, not even the common interests she shared with Kate, but the old, happy companionship she had renewed with himself. Not given to analysing his thoughts or feelings, or the circumstances in which he found himself, Andy had not realised how much he had missed her company nor flattered himself that she had intensely missed his.

But both were true. We are like Tom and Maggie Tulliver, Jessica thought—but no, Andy was no Tom Tulliver. He did not despise her for being a girl or grow cross because she was able to beat him at learning things. He did not hector or vaunt his masculinity as Tom had done over the loving, quicker-witted Maggie. Only in their affection did the analogy hold.

There was to-day, however, a new adjective which she applied to her companionship with Andy which before the war it would never have entered her head to use. But now, seeing her beloved brother so finely attuned to the country in which he had lived and worked for the past two years, the word sprang, fully armed, into her mind. His companionship, like

the countryside, was *tranquillising*. It was a word she had never, even mentally, employed before. But it expressed now exactly what she felt and she did not even stay to wonder that she should stand in need of 'tranquillising'. She accepted it.

All his life Andy had been happy—at home—in the world. Amiable as a baby, as a schoolboy and young man, it was as if all the good fairies had attended L.'s birth and bestowed grace and loving-kindness upon him—gifts so much more to be valued, thought his sister, than the brilliant brains his mother had desired for him.

But looking at him these days she could not imagine him caught up in this horror of modern war. He had listened to the case she had presented for reviewing the official presentation of the genesis of the war, without disputing it, as if he was not much concerned with the why or wherefore; as if he recognised the war as a nuisance, an interruption to his chosen way of life, but could see no reason why he should be left undisturbed to enjoy it while others were hurried away. Andy was no politician. He gave you the impression of one who supposed the business of governing a country and keeping the peace between the nations to be so difficult that failures must at times be expected. That one such should coincide with his own short span of life was unfortunate, but there was nothing, as far as he could see, that could be done about it.

Andy, Jessica thought, was his father's son, easy-going, living contentedly in the Now, not readily inclined to look back for any reason whatsoever to a period when he was not alive—as if he found the business of *being* alive too absorbing to leave any time to spare for relating the Then to the Now. Oh, thought Jessica, remembering, *What's Time? Leave Now for dogs and apes! Man has Forever*. And what compensation, she wondered, was that? What's Time?—*A maniac scattering dust*, said Tennyson. A clock-setter, said someone else—in Shakespeare? She couldn't remember. Time, for Jessica, was the sweet Now, spring and summer, the song of birds in the dawn, something of which, when you were young, you could never have enough. *Time escapes, Live now or never*.

But for all Andy's matter-of-fact attitude to his own part in

the war, she knew that as a soldier he would not wear that air of enchantment which had hung about some of those young men of her acquaintance who had seemed to think of the war as if it offered relief from the monotony of everyday life. For Andy did not find his life on the farm monotonous. Leaving it would be a desolating business, she knew, for he belonged to the soil. However, nothing was clearer than that Andy was wasting no premature pity on himself. *Live now, or never.*

When he asked her one morning if she would like to go into Stamford with him in the runabout she agreed with alacrity, promising herself a lovely morning roaming through the centuries. She hoped Andy's business a few miles beyond the centre of the town would take him a considerable time. The advantage of the petrol driven runabout over the pony-and-trap of earlier days was that you could go farther afield and so see more in the time at your disposal; but on an occasion such as this it was a distinct drawback, for Andy would do the extra miles in half the old time. However, having made a couple of calls in Bourne, they left the little town behind them and were soon running along at the exciting speed of thirty miles an hour. For a while they talked of nothing very much; it was more than sufficient for them to be driving together through Fenland on a sunny September morning. But, as they were approaching Essendine, Andy suddenly said, "What's this chap Harwood like?"

After a very slight hesitation while she recovered from her surprise, for in putting forward that gentleman's views she had only once mentioned his name, she said, "Well-informed on certain subjects, as you will have gathered."

Andy turned his head and smiled at her.

"That's all you know about him?"

"It's all that matters to me. For the rest, it's the merest chance acquaintance—he may be *anything* else, for all I know."

"Ah, well, you were always one for acquiring knowledge, I know. All the same . . ."

"Why 'all the same'? There's no mystery about it. I met him at Linda Hamilton's birthday party—we danced together. That was a few weeks before the war started. To my surprise

he turned up at the office one day nearly a year later—in May, I think—and invited me to have lunch with him.”

“Just like that!”

“Just like that.”

“Come off it!” said Andy.

“Honestly. I’d forgotten his very existence. When his card was brought into me I couldn’t at first remember where I’d heard the name before.”

“But he remembered you!”

“I doubt it—until, according to his own account, he found himself in the neighbourhood of the *Woman’s Review* office. Linda had told him about the new paper and my job in it—she seemed to think it all some kind of miracle. But it’s Linda’s heart that is her strong point, not her head. At the party I thought Mr. Harwood one of those tiresome young men who believe all women to be addle-pated. So when he meets one who, so he has been told, has a modicum of intelligence, he has to pretend he’s impressed.”

“Quite a speech,” said Andy; and then, “anyway, he asked you to lunch with him and you went.”

“And quite shamelessly picked his brains on a subject about which I knew nothing, save what I’d read in the papers.”

“But when you accepted the invitation you couldn’t have known he knew any more than you did.”

“True, O King!—but it was easier to say, ‘Well, thank you’ than to think up an excuse. I couldn’t, these last few months at the office, pretend I was busy. Besides, it was nearly one o’clock. Either I’d been to lunch or was about to go—and the former looked, I thought, slightly unconvincing. As it happened, I did the right thing.”

“Did you end by liking him a little better?”

“Only to the extent of being grateful to him for taking so much trouble over my questions and resolving some of my difficulties.”

“I’m sure he liked doing that. Very flattering. And you’ve not seen him since?”

“No.”

“Going to?”

"I shouldn't think so."

"Only think?"

"I mean *I* shan't make any move to that end."

"Supposing *he* does?"

"He hasn't my address."

Andy laughed.

"That's no obstacle. The Hamiltons would re-address letters, surely?"

Jessica said, "But the point doesn't arise."

She didn't explain why—that the fact of Gerald Harwood's having given her *his* address had put the onus of re-establishing contact upon her. Nor did she say that she had no intention of obliging him, nor any desire so to do.

"What's his job?"

"He's a Civil Servant—at the moment reserved."

"Conscientious objector?"

"Oh no. He merely thinks it important to understand why the war started and what it's about. And also that we should win, as of course it is. That's the awful part—that each country is determined to win, though common sense, it seems to me, would say that the best thing any of us can do now is to call a halt and try to adjust our differences. Instead, we all seem determined to fight to a finish, even though the civilised world is smashed up as a result. It seems lunacy to me. And yet the people who insist upon unconditional surrender, and that Germany must be smashed, *aren't* lunatics. People like Sir Henry Johnston, Rudyard Kipling, John Buchan, Mr. Churchill."

Aware that she had very neatly changed the topic of conversation, Andy said, "Maybe the Germans say and believe the same things about us."

"I'm sure they do—but that only makes it the more insane. You'd think there'd never been a war in Europe before this one, whereas Europe has always been a quarrelsome place. Even if we *could* 'smash' Germany it would be no guarantee of peace for evermore. War breeds war. But if you say these things nobody agrees with you."

"Except friend Harwood."

"I meant among people who just read the papers—those you meet every day in the trains in the morning—all saying the same thing, like a lot of parrots. Of course there's a considerable section of the population that believes the war could have been avoided, that hasn't got war-fever, and there are societies which hold meetings and try to counteract the spread of it. But the people who go to them are either like me, free of the fever and in need of a little moral support, or those who go just to break up the meetings. People can't *think* during a war."

"Maybe they'll start when the war's older, when the shoe begins to pinch at home and the shops haven't much to sell."

"They haven't already. Our grocer at home started a rationing scheme months ago. So much butter, so much sugar per person per week. Not the butcher—though if all the butchers shut up shop tomorrow *I* shouldn't mind in the least. Butter and sugar's a very different affair. I suspect, though, that when they do, people will begin to howl. Most of them think they'll starve if they don't eat meat. Perhaps that may bring the war to an end."

"Will nothing cure your dislike of eating meat?"

"Nothing. If ever I have a home of my own I shall never eat any any more. I shall have some vegetarian cookery lessons."

"What did you do for lunches in town?"

"Unless I was very rushed for time I went to a vegetarian restaurant in Friday Street. When I was, I had poached eggs in a teashop."

"No wonder you looked so pale when you arrived."

"Rubbish! I'm always what you call 'pale'. It can't do you any good to eat what you don't like. And if I liked the taste of it I should still dislike eating meat. For nearly four years, remember, on my way to school I had to pass a slaughter-yard attached to a butcher's shop. I didn't much like seeing either the terrified sheep being herded into it, or the stream of blood running from it on to the pavement into the gutter."

"Things have improved in that respect, these days."

"So they say. Have you read a little book called *Fifty Years With the Savages*, by Henry Salt? The savages were the meat eaters."

"Well, well!" said Andy, putting a hand over his sister's. "I see you're the same Jess who used to pull Ethie's hair for pulling the cat's tail—but I expect you read too much."

Jessica laughed, not quite certain how the conversation had arrived at this point, but glad that it had, since the war was not at all what she wanted to be talking about on such a fine morning, with the sun shining over the wide expanse of the Fens, with Stamford lying ahead and the lovely tower of St. Mary's Church and the spire of All Saints seeming to mount guard over the ancient town; and all the pleasure ahead of an hour spent outside this disappointing century in which she lived. Other wars there had been, but surely none as horrible as this one, into which all the ingenuity of modern science had been flung? Fourteen years of it only had gone by and already three wars had been waged in it. Whatever the result of this one, nothing, she felt, could ever be the same again. And nothing, she was convinced, would have changed for the better.

"I want to go to the post office," she told her brother, and he obligingly stopped at the corner of St. Peter's Street.

"Coffee at the George at twelve sharp," he suggested. "How's that? It's now a quarter to eleven."

"Lovely," she said.

Stamford is one of the towns of England that, with its beckoning beauty, does not disappoint upon closer inspection. Time, so people said, had passed it by, but to Jessica it was rather that Time had stayed with it, enshrined in the solid stone of which it was built. Even the signs of the war—the uniformed men, the army trucks—did not very much upset this impression, Jessica thought; no more, certainly, than did the imposing cars they often met in their outings driving out from the Naval Air Force station beyond Sleaford, to forage for food in the Fens. This was one of the many occasions when she wished Kate were with her. For what she herself knew of Stamford needed sorting out. Though it had managed to evade the fetters of nineteenth-century industrialism, she knew that it had not escaped involvement in the wars down the centuries. She knew that during the Wars of the Roses the town had been

so severely sacked that it was said never to have recovered. (But oh! how much she liked it as it was!) She knew also that it had flourished when wool was the staple industry of the country, and that in the fifteenth century—the century of civil war—it had suffered in the general decay of trade, and not until the scientific draining of the Fens was accomplished did agriculture bring prosperity once more to the county.

Somewhere down the centuries it had lost its monastic houses and eight of its fourteen churches—but how beautiful the remaining six were! Its Norman castle had long since fallen into decay, and of the attempts to found a university in the town nothing now remained but a gateway, with a date—1300. Yet there was so much of interest to see in the old town, with its fine stone houses and beautiful churches and other signs of its long and exciting past, that, to Jessica, it was a perennially enthralling place. Her allotted hour went by on wings and with a little sigh of satisfaction she turned and walked briskly in the direction of the George. Watching the cars coming swiftly down St. Martin's and St. Mary's Hill, driven obviously by those who had no time to spare for the Past and who hooted everyone out of their way in the Present, she thought what a nuisance it would be if they had! Probably all they saw in Stamford was a tiresome town for the motorist, an interruption in the long stretch of the Great North Road, a good place to stop for lunch or a drink or a comfortable bed, with no thought of those who centuries earlier had travelled its length—the Kings and Queens and the exalted of England travelling in great style and pomp on their way farther north or, perhaps, to visit at some great house—my lord of Burghley's maybe. For Elizabeth had established the Cecils here and her Lord High Treasurer lay buried beneath an immensity of alabaster and marble in the Church of St. Martin, past which, regardless, the motorists careered as they entered the town. But for most people, she had come to understand, there was no bridge between Yesterday and To day; no sense of the Past, no curiosity about the human beings who had peopled it.

Andy was awaiting her at the George. As she went in she glanced at the doors on either side of the entrance, old friends

of hers, with their little china labels, reading 'London' on one and 'York' on the other—reminders of the days when there were no railways and people travelled by coach, and the hotels from which they started provided waiting-rooms and good fires for the passengers.

"Had a good time?" Andy asked her as they walked off to the room where coffee was served.

"Lovely," she told him. For the second time that morning!

When they reached home, just in time for the midday meal, a letter lay beside Jessica's plate re-addressed in her sister's deplorable script. The handwriting she had scrawled through Jessica at once recognised as Drury's—unusually bold and clear for a doctor, she considered, as though he had taken his lecture notes in shorthand and so had avoided the mean and niggling penmanship of the generality of students. She left it unopened until the meal was over, when she took it upstairs, slit the envelope and withdrew a single sheet of notepaper, upon which was written half-a-dozen lines telling her that the writer had just reached home on a few days' leave, that he was due back on the twenty-fifth, and asking if it were possible for them to meet one evening. The note was dated the twentieth.

Turning back to the envelope, Jessica saw that the letter had taken three days to reach her. Drury's bold script had been well-spaced out upon the envelope, leaving plenty of room between the lines, but instead of utilising this for the re-addressing, Ethie had scrawled her pen straight across the original direction and then screwed up that of the farm into the left-hand corner, so, although for once correctly spelt, the new address did not jump to the eye. Had this, she wondered, delayed the letter, or had Ethie not been over-expeditious in re-posting it? Whichever way it was, short of announcing at once that she must catch the first available train that afternoon she saw no hope, assuredly no certainty, of arriving in time to see Drury before his departure. But to leave in such a delirium of haste would mean advancing a reason, and the only one she could give would be the correct one, which, almost certainly, would mean a little harmless teasing. But that she could bear.

What she felt she could not endure was the situation which would certainly be created at home by her appearance three days earlier than she was expected, since, again, none but the true explanation could be given, and that, she was sure, could only produce one effect, quite apart from Ethie's smirks and innuendoes. Nobody at home, she felt (not even her mother, though she would at least be tactful), would really believe that out of pure friendship she had cut short a holiday she was enjoying in order to see Drury before he returned to the Front. Most certainly the scent of a romance would be laid, and this was something from which Jessica shied away, well enough aware, however, that no one would believe that a girl who had steeped herself for years in English poetry, which, after all, has a good deal to say about love, was at twenty-one completely untouched by that emotion. Nevertheless it was true. As yet poetry, for Jessica, was little more than the right words in the right place; she could get drunk on them. They were the scented blossoms hanging on the tree of life, the soft winds blowing over the word. All she knew of love was what the poets through the centuries had said of it. To all intents and purposes Drury Hamilton was right—she had never *heard* of love.

Maybe I'm a cold, dehumanised creature, she thought, as she sat down to write to him. She liked him better than any of the few young men of her acquaintance, but I'm simply not in love with him, she told herself. Maybe I shall never be in love with anyone, she thought, feeling suddenly forlorn, as if this letter was a knife cutting Drury clean out of her life. Two lines from Browning might have solaced her had she remembered them:

*It was not her time to love: beside,
Her life had many a hope and aim . . .*

But she did not.

She wrote a graceful letter to Drury, explaining the apparent delay of his letter and regretting that her absence from home made it impossible for her to arrive in time to see him. She gave him what news she had, including that of the

total loss of *Woman's Review*, but not mentioning the encounter with Gerald Harwood (for the simple reason that it did not enter her mind), wished him all good fortune, hoped she would see him on his next leave, and was his sincere friend, Jessica. . . .

Nevertheless, as she consigned it to its stamped envelope and hurried out to take it to the post, she thought it must be quite the dullest letter she had ever written, and a little sadness fell about her as she hurried along, as if the brightness had fallen from the day.

She comforted herself by reflecting that she would very much have liked to have seen Drury, if it could have been managed without so many invitations to misunderstandings, not least to him. She was aware that her letter might give pain, but about that she could now do nothing. Yet as it fell with a little thud into the box she had an odd feeling that she had thrown down a gauntlet to Fate, and been, perhaps, a little too precipitate about it. There had, however, been no time in which to reconsider her decision and, in some fashion she did not understand, she still felt she had done right to send the letter, but was sorry that Drury must read it.

CHAPTER FOUR

ABOUT a week after Jessica's return home she received a letter from Gerald Harwood (though it was scarcely entitled to that description, being no more than half a dozen lines on a sheet of notepaper) asking her if she would care to go for a walk on the forthcoming Saturday, if she were free and the weather permitted, in which case he suggested that she met him at Richmond station at two-thirty or thereabouts.

Thoughtfully Jessica returned the note to its envelope and locked it into her little desk, which afforded a safe harbourage against her sister's passion for minding other people's business. Being unfamiliar with Gerald Harwood's handwriting, she had

frowned at the envelope and supposed it to be a reply to one of several answers she had recently sent to advertisements for 'a capable and experienced shorthand-writer', though she would have expected the envelope to have been typed. Certainly the last thing she had expected was a note from Gerald Harwood, for it was just upon five months since they had lunched together. She noted that the letter had been addressed direct to her, not sent on by Linda or any other member of her family, as she would have expected it to have been; but perhaps he was in touch with Linda, Red Cross or no.

Although the prospect of a walk was always attractive to Jessica, she was by no means certain that she wanted to spend an afternoon in Gerald Harwood's company. For what, if it wasn't the war, would they find to talk about? She couldn't imagine, and she certainly didn't want to talk of the war. By this time he had become almost a stranger to her. But had he, for that matter, ever been anything else? Except when she had advanced at the farm a brief synopsis of the causes of the war he had put before her, and when Andy had so unexpectedly teased her about him on the morning they had driven into Stamford, he had not been in her thoughts; and his arguments, indeed, were far more actual to her than he was, so that as she re-read his note, remarking the firm clear, script, she had to make a deliberate effort to recall, in any detail, his appearance.

Tall, broad-shouldered. Dark hair, holding a slight frontal wave. Grey eyes in a face too full to give any hint of bone structure. A short moustache over full red lips. Distinctly not good-looking but his height and build gave a suggestion of strength and reliability, in which, nonetheless, she did not entirely believe—she didn't know why. But she remembered chiefly his hands, long, slender, very white, that had passed her things at table, making rather a business of it, as if he wished them to be noticed—obviously vain of them, as people with such hands, she thought, usually were. And suddenly, for some reason, she found herself thinking of Drury Hamilton's hands—square, capable, with widely-spaced fingers. And immensely gentle, she remembered, her mind flinging suddenly back to her childhood when he had so unexpectedly appeared upon the

scene and taken over the horrid business of cleansing the wound in her throat.

None of this, however, helped her to decide the question of the proposed walk, the re-opening of a chance acquaintance; but it was very likely, she thought, that the weather would solve it for her. Since her return from the farm, and the departure of the lovely benedictory September, October had arrived—a drab procession so far of sunless days which soon, she felt, might have rain as well as cold added to their unattractiveness. Nevertheless, the letter must be answered, and in the seclusion of her bedroom she tossed a coin to decide whether it should be in the positive or negative. Heads I go, tails I don't. The coin rose and fell. Heads. She stooped and picked it up, shrugged her shoulders, then sat down and wrote a note of acceptance, as brief as that of the invitation. She decided not to post it until the morning, by which time she might have made up her mind to send instead a polite note of refusal. But she did not, probably because the next morning a letter arrived asking her to call about eleven o'clock at an address in Holborn, with reference to her application for an advertised post as shorthand-typist. It was without further consideration that she picked up her note for Mr. Harwood and posted it on her way to the station.

The advertiser turned out to be the head of a legal firm, clearly a man of breeding, with a small staff, and most of her work, she learned, would be with him, a man she judged to be in the late thirties, though she would also be expected to take such dictation as his clerk required, mainly correspondence. She explained that her work had been so far in editorial offices, that she had no legal experience although she had been well-trained in the setting-out of legal documents on the typewriter, and in legal terms. Nevertheless, the test given was merely a letter to, she supposed, an imaginary client, apparently engaged in the final stages of buying a country property, which she was required to read back and not to type. She was not surprised to find that although she had not used her shorthand except for her own convenience for some time, it was as much her willing servant as ever. To know Pitmanic shorthand thoroughly is to

have it for ever. It seemed to her, nevertheless, a very casual test of her abilities—a test which almost anyone with no more than a workable knowledge of the system and a fair memory could have managed. She felt distinctly affronted, but could only suppose that in view of her letter giving details of her training and experience the simple test was held to be sufficient. The lesser salary she had decided, when answering the advertisement, was offset by the free Saturday mornings, and she knew she was not likely to find even a secretarial post on a paper, much less such a one as she held on the *Review*, until the war ended and things returned to something approaching normality, if they ever did. Yet on the way home she felt a distinct lowering of her spirits, for which she was quite unable to account by anything she remembered of the interview save what she thought of as its casualness—almost as though the engagement had been of an office boy.

This impression continued to tease her mind for several days, but she finally dismissed it, with her usual common sense, as ridiculous. After all, if there proved to be anything about the situation which she did not like, she need not stay in it.

She arrived at Richmond station on the Saturday with a couple of minutes in hand, but she found Gerald Harwood awaiting her. She saw him, as she stood among others to give up her ticket, before he caught sight of her, and thought that he looked a little self-conscious, as if he had never before waited for a girl to keep an appointment; and yet as if the non-chalance was assumed as a shield and buckler (though from what?) But when he saw her he came forward, raising his hat and smiling and not offering to shake hands, for which she awarded him a good mark—the habit people had of shaking hands upon the slightest pretext always a little irritated her. She knew that she was not late and so expressed no regret that she had kept him waiting. He smiled upon her and said that he was afraid it would be a little chilly by the river. “I think we should do better in the Park and you can look down at the river view from the top of Richmond Hill. Meantime, I’m afraid we have George Street and Saturday shoppers to negotiate.”

Perhaps for this reason conversation went limping until they were clear of the busy street, had left shoppers and traffic behind and were walking up the hill, and soon, slipping through a gate on to the terrace, Jessica realised that she was gazing down upon the famous view—river, meadows, the slopes of Petersham and the outstretched country to the west—of which she had so often heard people speak, though most of them would have seen it in its summer dress. It must be what Irene Forsyte and Philip Bosinney had looked at that evening in the 'nineties when they'd driven down by hansom to dine with a party at the hotel at the top of Richmond Hill. Glancing at her face as she stood there, Gerald said, "You look very serious. Quite lost in thought."

Jessica came swiftly back to the present.

"Oh dear, I'm so sorry. I was thinking of two of Galworthy's characters from *The Man of Property* who came here together and looked at the view."

"Many people, I suspect, have been made to do that in many novels," Gerald said, smiling at her. "Are you a novel addict?"

She liked his choice of expression no better than his lightly scornful tone. She said, "I wouldn't use the word 'addict' though I certainly read novels. But I read at least as much from other branches of literature."

"You would call novels 'literature'?"

"Some of them, certainly."

"The lower slopes, perhaps?"

"If you like. Some, certainly. But I like browsing up and down the mountainside."

"Which isn't what you usually do on mountainsides, of course."

"Do you never read novels?"

"Oh, certainly, but I prefer my reading to pay dividends."

"You mean you only read to add to your knowledge?"

"Precisely."

"But surely novels qualify sometimes—if only for shedding light upon human nature?"

He smiled and laid his hand upon her arm.

"Do you really find human nature so interesting? Come along—I can't have you catching cold."

They walked on and out at the further gate, and then, suddenly, her pleasure in the charming scene suffered eclipse, for now, hobbling on crutches, pushing themselves along in wheel-chairs, minus an arm, a leg, with bandaged limbs and faces, came towards them the early casualties of the war. Here, beyond the fine words, the pomp and circumstance, she thought, is your war and its aftermath—the *pale, the fallen, the untimely sacrifice*. She walked on, pity and anger contending within her, the beauty of the day, in its autumn dress, quite forgotten.

Gerald Harwood now wished he had taken the lower road and climbed up that way into the Park. He had forgotten about the hotel now being used as a home for the disabled. He made no comment. As for the ancient hotel, all it had ever had was the view from its terrace, and that would remain. The place had completely outlived its day and had never been beautiful. He would see it pulled down and another building erected more suited to its new purpose, without a pang, Mr. Galsworthy's fictional characters notwithstanding.

"You look very well," he said. "Have you been away?"

She explained, briefly. She had no desire to put into words for so slight an acquaintance the first real disappointment in her young life.

"And will you, do you suppose, find the legal world of interest?" he asked, to which she said, no, she didn't in the least suppose so.

"But it should afford you further knowledge of human nature, should it not?" he asked, smiling down at her.

"Human nature at its worst, perhaps."

"That will depend to a certain extent upon the firm. If it's a solid family affair you will probably find it mainly occupied with the management of large estates, the buying and selling of property, rather than with divorce or libel cases."

She hadn't the faintest idea whether or not it was a family business or what it specialised in, she said. But it was run with a small staff, of which she would make the third member. Most of her work, she understood, would be with the head of

the firm, who, so she gathered from his notepaper heading, was a Doctor of Law.

"And when do you start?"

"On Monday, unless I hear to the contrary. I imagine this means if my references are considered satisfactory."

"Then I think we may definitely say you *are* starting on Monday," Gerald said with a smile. "Well, I wish you good luck. By the way, have you been to any meetings of the U.D.C. or to hear any of the speakers I recommended?"

"Oh yes. I've heard both Brailsford and Mrs. Swanwick. The meetings were noisy, but I remembered your injunction not to turn round at interruptions. There's one announced for November, to which I hope to go. I can't understand what it is which makes this Society so hated. It's not a 'stop the war' concern."

"It tells truths very inconvenient to the Government, indicts our foreign policy over a good many years. The Press, solid for the Government and the prosecution of the war, exploits, I'm afraid, the public ignorance and general lack of knowledge of foreign affairs. Or should I not say that to a journalist, perhaps?"

"I'm afraid I agree with you, and in any case I was a mere fledgling, and doubt now if I shall ever be anything more."

"I think you'd be well advised not to go to the meeting advertised for next month. I've an idea the self-styled patriots mean to make serious trouble. I'm not at all sure you should go to any of these meetings alone. Wouldn't your father go with you?"

"I'm quite sure he wouldn't. He can't understand why *I* go, and that I do worries my mother, I know, a good deal. But I'm so poker-faced and passive all the time nobody would think I cared either way."

"Well, I think you should refrain from going to the next."

"But you make me want to go very much," she said, and then, changing her mind about asking him if he ever went to the meetings, abandoned the topic, much to his surprise and satisfaction, and remarked, "I'd no idea Richmond Park was so extensive."

"Have you not been here before?"

"I think I came once, as a very small girl. My parents had friends here and at Kew, and I remember the trips we made to see them by the river steamers. But if we ever came up here we shouldn't have done more than mull around the Richmond Gate—my sister and I and my brother were very small, and my parents have never been walkers, anyway. They prefer to 'stroll'."

It was a mild day and the late autumn tints held a nostalgic beauty that Jessica found as attractive as that of spring. Useless to tell her that things were dying. If they were, it was only to come to life again in the spring. Jessica accepted the year in its entirety—the complete diurnal round of the earth, having no strong feeling against the much-maligned English climate, except when it unleashed a heat-wave, which robbed her of energy and the pleasures of walking.

They struck off across the grass, and at once Gerald, who had earlier recognised her as no tetterer upon high heels, found himself delighted to realise how good a walker she was, with a steady, even pace to which he found it easy to accommodate his own. And as they walked Jessica grew more and more delighted with her surroundings, feeling herself miles from London and its suburbs, and, as always, exhilarated by the mere business of walking, whether alone or not. If Gerald Hawood entertained any idea that his company was the cause of it, he was much mistaken.

"How old is this park?" she asked, turning to survey the way along which they had come. "Some of these trees must have been standing for ages!"

"They have. We owe the Park to Charles I, who stocked it with deer—probably those which roam about here to-day are their descendants. They're usually very tame, but not at this time of the year."

"And what happened to the Park after Charles's execution?" Jessica asked.

"Parliament gave it to the citizens of London, and they, at the Restoration, presented it to Charles II."

"And what about the Palace? Where did that stand?"

"Not up here. The exact site is probably the spot from which the *old* deer Park extends northwards to Kew, running alongside the towpath. It once covered ten acres of ground. To-day nothing remains of it but a gateway, preserved on the Green, and a small section of the Wardrobe Court in Old Palace Yard. The Kew Observatory was built near the old site."

"How old was the Palace? I know that Elizabeth, according to my history book, died there. Do you know a lot about it? If so, please enlighten my ignorance." This, she thought, appeared to be his role when they met, but anything was acceptable as a topic of conversation if it kept them from that of the war.

"It's not a very exciting story—not much more than a list of the names of the Kings who built and rebuilt—from Edward I to Henry VII."

"Wasn't it called 'Sheen' Palace at one time?"

"Yes. So was the town of Richmond, which has been a borough since the reign of Edward I, and we know there was a Manor of Sheen in his day because it's on record that he received the Scotch Commissioners there. You've been to school later than I have, so maybe you can supply the date of Edward's reign."

"Oh," said Jessica, and there was a short pause, after which she said, with complete assurance, "Twelve-seventy-two, thirteen-seven."

"Are you guessing?" he asked.

"Oh no. At school I had to learn the dates of our Kings and Queens off by heart—just as one learns the multiplication tables. So now it's quite automatic, once I get started."

"Well, well!—and I suppose, by the same token, you could reel off the chief events in each reign?"

"Oh no. I daresay I could remember the outstanding ones, or some of them. For instance, of the reign of Edward I, I can't at the moment remember much save that he expelled all the Jews, and carried out certain land reforms."

"Certain *other* reforms," said Gerald.

She did not at first see the implication of this remark, but when it dawned upon her she did not refer to it, but went on.

"He was only indulging the national prejudice against the Jews because there were the Italians to fall back upon as money-lenders. They were as useful as the Jews, but, as it soon appeared, had learnt their methods."

Gerald laughed.

"Well, he gets another good mark for trying and another for preserving Sheen Manor, around which the Palace gradually grew up."

"But, of *course*, I'd forgotten. Edward I was a great builder, and is said to have planned as well as built. A feature of his reign was the fine ecclesiastical architecture. I certainly should have remembered that!"

"Well, try your hand at the next on the rebuilding list. Edward III. What do you remember about him?"

"Chiefly, I suppose, that he was the father of the Black Prince, and that he started the Hundred Years War with France."

"Oh, was *he* the bloke? No good marks, I'm afraid, then, palace or no palace. However, he was eventually gathered to his fathers, and we find Richard II at Sheen a good deal with his wife. But she died there, after which Richard had the place torn down. Comments, please."

"She was Ann of Bohemia, quite famous for being beautiful, clever and good. My history book said he was maddened with grief when she died, and he made a scene in the Abbey with my Lord of Arundel, who kept the funeral service waiting. I expect he couldn't bear the thought of the Palace without her."

"Well, well, it seems a bit excessive."

"He was a very young man, you know, only twenty-three, I think, when she died; and he had inherited a difficult job. Ann was good and clever, and must have been a great help to him. The French wars his grandfather had started up, and in which his father had fought, were still going on, the country was heavily taxed to pay for them, and riots were frequent."

"England, in short, had been left in a bad way?"

"Yes, and the war wasn't going very well. and of course there was the Lancastrian Party very watchful in the wings. And Uncle Gloucester, who belonged to it. I suppose

the idea of facing it single-handed was just unbearable."

"You're remarkably well-informed, aren't you, on this period?"

"No, but I did succeed at least in grasping its essentials. At school I found the Middle Ages most confusing and had to put in some hard work on them. But they suddenly began to be interesting, and I read the period for pleasure, so that now I appear much better informed than I really am, with my odds and ends of recollection. And I'm hopelessly prejudiced, I must confess, about Richard of Bordeaux."

"Expound, well-educated infant!"

"I'm anything but that. All the history I know is much too early. It would have been much more sensible if I'd read the period to which I belong."

"Keep to your point and justify your allegiance to Richard."

"Well, in the first place, I think it's because, in an age already deep in the Hundred Years War with France, Richard persistently loved peace and the arts of peace. He became their patron even though he knew the people grudged every penny spent on anything but the French wars. Then there was his relationship with Ann. Comparing it with the usual marriage of political intrigue, I found it most enticing."

"You surprise me," said Gerald, turning his head and smiling at her, but getting no acknowledgment of this gambit, added, "I've never before met anybody who took history so personally. You should be an historical novelist!"

"If I could be a novelist at all," she commented, "which I can't. But it's the personal side of history which is interesting, don't you think?—not the long list of battles. That's why I remember Richard's marriage, two years after Ann's death, to the very young daughter of the French King, which he arranged to confirm the peace which had been made with France. He had secured a truce of twenty-eight years—and by his subjects was considered a coward for his pains! There seems no doubt that as a nation we did like the fighting with France. It appears to have been our hereditary foe."

"But that raises a point of particular interest to me," Gerald told her. "When my mother insists that every English King,

until the reign of King George I, considered he had a right to the French throne, I feel there must be an argument somewhere to withstand her, but I can never find it."

"I'm afraid she's right. It used to puzzle me too, until I was told that we must blame William the Conqueror, who in 1066 just added us to his Duchy of Normandy. Kings who ruled on this side of the Channel possessed dominions on the other, and it was only natural, in those days, they should want to extend them. But we shall never finish with the history of Richmond Palace if you keep tempting me down such inviting side-paths."

"There's a good deal of the afternoon left."

"Lighting-up time is five o'clock, and I must be home by then."

"Surely not?"

"Oh, yes, I'm expected for tea. Do we have to retrace our steps or are we making for another gate?"

"Yes, the Robin Hood, from which we can get a bus up the Vale to Putney High Street."

"Then do go on with the rebuilding of Sheen Palace. Who comes next on the list?"

"Henry V, I think. If my memory serves, Henry IV was a non-starter."

"Well, having grabbed Richard's throne and put him in the Tower, Henry of Lancaster would be too busy consolidating his position, I suppose, for rebuilding palaces. A lot of things must have been happening just then, if I could only remember them. Charles of France, for one thing, would certainly have been clamouring for the return of his little daughter. He knew well enough that Henry of Lancaster was no Richard and that he would certainly assert his 'right' to the French throne. And there'd be the usual crop of troubles at home with the Scots and the Irish, to say nothing of the Welsh. You know, considering what a trouble it was to govern England in those days, it has always staggered me that there should have been so many competing for the job."

"I gather you wouldn't agree with the Chestertonian school that lauds the Middle Ages as one of the golden eras of the world?"

"No—that is, if I believed there have ever been any."

"In spite of the fact that at least they couldn't have been dull—even for ordinary folk, what with the music, the dancing in the streets, the feasts, pageantry and pilgrimages?"

"Bread and circuses, surely? Even so, there were several serious rebellions, the Peasants', Wat Tyler's, Cade's. But it's the pageantry and pilgrimages the Golden Agers see, of course, and the fine buildings and cathedrals and palaces like that of Sheen, doubtless. Remembering the two years of the Black Death, which halved the population, gives a good idea of general conditions. And the Black Death couldn't have been much fun!"

"Even the twentieth century, with a European war on our hands, is to be preferred?"

"There were wars and to spare in the Middle Ages, plus everything else! But we're getting farther and farther from Sheen and its Palace."

"Well, the going's very pleasant—for me, certainly, and informative. We're nearly through. We've arrived at Henry V, who, despite the French war, is now busy rebuilding. Any good marks for anything else?"

"Not with me. He started with a clean slate at home—most of the trouble-makers had been quelled by his fathers. But the French King had gone mad and so it seemed an excellent time to start up the French wars again."

"Oh yes. . . . *Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more: or close the wall up with our English dead!*"

"Poetry or no poetry, I never want to read Shakespeare's historical plays again. But, with a French mother, you must know this chapter of history much better than I do."

"Not really. Just names—Agincourt, Rouen, Jeanne d'Arc, the Peace of Troyes . . ."

"Rouen. Yes. One of the books I had to read for matric. gave details of the preparations by the Governor for that siege. I've never forgotten them."

"Let's hear them."

"Ten churches were pulled down, abbeys near the walls and all houses and trees cleared away, and the ditch sown with

spikes. When food gave out, twelve thousand starving people were thrust out of the gates by the Governor. King Harry wouldn't let them through his lines, but though the English soldiers shared their rations with them more than half died—in the ditch.”

“It's easy to see when the seeds of the hatred of war were sown in *your* young breast!”

“I wasn't so young, either. I was at the impressionable age, when you remember. I was only meant to pass an exam, but that book did much more for me than that.” She laughed and added, “It very nearly did too much. I was so very partisan I wonder I wasn't ploughed outright.”

“The examiners must have found you a blessed relief—a spring of clear water in the desert of examinees, all saying the same thing in the same words! Does King Harry join in those who get no marks, despite his services at Sheen? I wonder what he was like when he wasn't fighting.”

“That couldn't have been often! But my book had quite a lot to say about him as a man. Rather surprising, most of it, though it didn't soften my young heart towards him. Tall, strong, honest, and a man of his word. As you'd expect, he loved hunting as much as fighting, but, strange to say, was also fond of books and took pleasure in beautiful buildings and art.”

“But withal he was a determined campaigner against the hereditary foe?”

“That didn't count against him in his day, of course. He believed—so my history book told me—that God had chosen him to conquer and reform France! The nation approved of his efforts, and loved him for his bravery and success. They couldn't foresee the bitter harvest of his sowing.”

“The loss, you mean, in the next reign, of all we held in France, save Calais? The reign of the siege of Orleans, Rouen and of Jeanne d'Arc.”

“But it was the reign, in the main, of regents. Henry VI was a child when his father died, and when these French affairs were in progress. Also he inherited his French grandfather's mental illness, and those who took over his duties proved very bad regents.”

"And, as he had no part in our rebuilding project, needn't be considered here. That brings us to—what?"

"The War of the Roses, I'm afraid—more than thirty years' fighting up and down England. But we're not going into that maze this afternoon."

"No, we make the final jump ahead to Henry, Earl of Richmond, Henry VII."

"A gap of over sixty years. Did the Palace remain intact all that time?"

"Longer, for it's on record Henry held a fine tournament there soon after the Perkin Warbeck rebellion. But a few years later it was burnt down, and Henry rebuilt. He then renamed it Richmond—in compliment to his Yorkshire castle."

"Or to himself—as Earl of Richmond, more likely! Such a pity, I used to think, that he was at hand when Richard was killed on the field at Bosworth—they must just have picked up the crown and stuck it on his head. *Someone* had to wear it at once, and Henry took good care, I'm sure, to be on the right spot at the right moment. But, of course, that's just nonsense, like a good deal of the rest of what I've said this afternoon. The rebels—the Lancastrians—had already chosen him as King because he was personable and able."

"No good marks?"

"Not from me. He was tricky and crafty, and his claim to the throne was extremely poor, which explains, if it doesn't excuse, so much of what he did. He had to guard himself at all points, even putting his betrothed, Elizabeth of York, in the Tower directly he came to the throne, though he had to take her out again and marry her when Parliament told him to, so merging the Yorkist claims to the throne with his own Lancastrian, though that didn't make his any the stronger. But I've no doubt he felt safer."

"And that brings the history lesson to an end for to-day?" he asked, smiling down upon her.

"Except that I should like to know the rest of the story of Sheen Palace."

"There isn't much, and it's a considerable anti-climax. As

you know, I expect, Henry VIII gave it to Wolsey in exchange for the newly-built Hampton Court, and though a good deal was done to it by the Prince of Wales during the reign of James I, it went steadily downhill after the execution of Charles I. However, enough of it remained as late as the reign of the second George to make it of use as a royal residence for dowager queens."

"Poor things!" commented Jessica. "How cold they must have found it! Does nothing of it remain to-day?"

"A gateway, preserved on Richmond Green, and a small section of the Wardrobe Court in Old Palace Yard. And here we are at the Robin Hood Gate. There should be a bus in a few minutes' time which will take us up Putney Vale to the High Street. Can you really not stay for tea?"

She said, "Really not, thank you," and sat down, was offered a cigarette and said once again that she didn't smoke, wondering if it was always necessary to say things twice over to this young man. Lighting his own cigarette, he said, "Well, that was a very interesting talk."

Jessica laughed. "And most misleading," she said. "To hear me, you'd think, if you didn't know any better, that war was the only thing that happened in the Middle Ages. You'd never have any idea that in the fourteenth century there was a Parliament, with a lower House and something approximating to our House of Lords. Or that trade flourished and foreign craftsmen were welcomed to pass their knowledge on to the English, that marvellous buildings went up, and that Chaucer was writing his *Canterbury Tales*. And what about William Caxton and Gutenberg and his Bible in the fifteenth?—the first book that was ever printed?"

"Oh, yes, of course, but we were following the history of Sheen Palace, and you brought the past to life most admirably, I thought."

"But I judge it and the people who belong to it by the standards of our own time, which, surely, is to falsify it?"

"Are our own standards so high?"

"In comparison, yes, even if our performance falls short. We haven't outgrown the folly of war, but we can claim that we

don't hang people in chains and leave them dying for days: we don't throw our worst criminals into the Tower to rot. We're not, as a nation, boorish and dirty as we were as late as the reign of Charles II, nor, thank heaven! any longer 'theologians to a man', as someone has described us as being then."

"So we no longer enforce our brand of religious belief by use of the rack. The word 'heretic' has no meaning?"

"Yes, but, you see, although I know that in earlier centuries religion and politics were inextricably mixed up, it doesn't soften my judgment of those who did the persecuting, and were so cruel in their punishments. I acknowledge the slow advance of civilisation without being able to excuse what was done by those less civilised than we are to-day. I take my history, in fact, much too personally. I don't really put myself back into the past. I judge by my own standards and reactions in the present. Which is all wrong."

"That, perhaps, is why you make it seem real, rather than just something we had to wrestle with at school and proceeded, upon leaving, to forget all about."

"But it should not have stopped, as for my generation it did, with the death of William and the accession of Victoria. I know practically nothing of modern history, or the events of my own lifetime."

"That is easily rectified."

Jessica said that she would find neither of the things which most interested her were needed in a lawyer's office.

"That new job of yours seems to be a little on your mind."

She laughed, but the remark underlined her own reactions to that vaguely disturbing interview of a few days ago; which her pleasant afternoon had driven from her mind.

"You must give me the name of the firm, so that I can ring and inquire how you are getting on. No time like the present."

He took out a notebook and pencil and waited and, rather to her own surprise, she made no demur.

"You won't need to write it down," she told him. "It's Bardell—H. H. Bardell & Son, Freeman's Court, High Holborn, W.C."

"Bardell?" Gerald's pencil hovered. He shook his head.

"Never mind," Jessica told him. "Here comes our bus, I think."

In the bus they did not talk very much; indeed, Jessica felt so barren of conversational gambits that she left the course to Gerald, who told her that he had lunch with Linda Hamilton a week ago, and that Drury, he believed, had been home on leave back in September (which she could have confirmed, but did not). At Putney, unable to shake her resolution to go straight home, he saw her on to the requisite bus and went his way.

"Bardell," he reflected, as he strode along the Upper Richmond Road, hoping shortly to be able to pick up the Richmond bus. Why should she think he would know the name? It was some time before it dawned upon him. A character in Dickens, of course. Feminine gender, but in some way connected with the law—he must look it up. He was faintly annoyed, more with Jessica than himself. Riding home that young woman smiled quietly to herself. He doesn't read novels! she thought. . . .

She was in the house just before five, and so in excellent time for tea, much to Emma's satisfaction, for who was this young man, pray, to think he had a right to keep her young daughter out after dark? . . .

"Thought you'd have yours out," said Ethic, grinning.

"I said I should be home," Jessica calmly replied.

"Enjoy your walk?"—from her father.

"Very much."

"Go far?"

"Not very. Up the hill to Richmond Gate and across the Park to the Robin Hood. We caught a bus there up the Vale, and then I waited for the thirty-seven and walked up from East Hill."

Having told everybody all they could possibly want to know about her afternoon she drew up her chair to the table and sat down. Her walk had given her an appetite, and so long as she wasn't expected to talk of her outing she was prepared to be as chatty as the family desired.

CHAPTER FIVE

JESSICA'S first impressions of her new situation were no more pleasurable or otherwise than she had expected them to be. Deflected from the kind of work she wanted, and felt herself fitted, to do, that with which she was now occupied was nothing more than a way of earning a living, since it did not appear to have any compensating qualities. It had not, she reflected at the end of her first week, made any demands whatsoever upon her abilities. Even the legal phraseology had presented, so far, no difficulties; odd as some of it was, none was outside the scope of that side of her training and her own reading. Nothing here, she decided, seemed likely to be asked of her other than what she could take easily in her stride. It was all, she felt, rather dull.

It was not long, however, before she was disposed to think the adjective ill-chosen. For she had discovered that Hugh Bardell—'Mr. Hugh', as he was called by Goring, his managing clerk, who had been with the firm in the days when James Bardell, Mr. Hugh's father, was at its head and a distinction between them was desirable—lived in a state of perpetual nervous exasperation. So precarious, indeed, was his calm that the smallest thing could shatter it—a delayed letter, the inability of Austen, the junior, to get someone immediately on the telephone, the changing of the date of an appointment. So far she had not been involved in these crises, and though it was true that she had not, so far as she knew, given any cause why she should have been, neither did it appear that Goring or Austen were to blame for the annoyance which called forth so much wrath.

The first time she had seen this characteristic in operation was on one of those mornings when Mr. Hugh was late coming to the office and Goring had seized the opportunity of making use of her services meanwhile. She was still so engaged when the sharp snap of the green baize inner door of his room announced Mr. Hugh's arrival. Goring went on quietly

dictating, Austen at his side dealing with papers and documents as they were passed over to him. After a brief interval, Mr. Hugh's door snapped open again and almost simultaneously that of Goring's room was flung back and Jessica found her ears assailed by a torrent of angry speech such as she had never heard in her life before. Greatly embarrassed, she sat where she was, observing that, although Austen looked as embarrassed as she felt, James Goring never turned a hair. He was a large, shapeless person, invariably amiable, whom in her mind she had labelled Falstaff, and he now opposed to Mr. Hugh's onslaught an amused and completely unruffled front. The day was his, for it was clear that Hugh Bardell's fury was concerned with no more and no less than the tiresome but legendary dalliance of the law and its minions which had once engaged the attention of Dickens. It was equally clear to Jessica, completely in ignorance of the special circumstance which was infuriating her employer, that James Goring was as inured to his tantrums as to the occurrences which aroused them; so the angrier his employer grew, the more amused and detached he became. When he could get a word in edgeways it was a pertinent one, and very neatly spitted upon the sharp point of his unflinching sense of the ridiculous.

The tantrum was still in full flood when she rose and made good her escape to her own room, returning when the snap of the door announced that her employer had retired from the fray. She found the managing clerk working urbanely away at opening and annotating the post, tossing laughing comments the while across to Austen. He at once took up dictation where he had left off, and almost immediately after her return to her room Mr. Hugh's bell summoned her to his, where, as if in acknowledgment of her escape from his clerk's room during the scene had had made there, he at once apologised for his irritability, a circumstance which left her speechless, since it was not to her, she thought, that an apology was due.

But nothing was clearer than that in the quarter where, so she considered, an apology might be appropriate, none was expected, nor, indeed, it was obvious, would have been welcomed. And it was not very long before Jessica understood

why, for these ebullitions revealed themselves as a familiar part of office procedure. Neither Jimmy Goring nor young Austen, however, appeared to harbour any ill-feelings at these by no means infrequent exhibitions, because, as she sensed, they were both perfectly aware that it was not they who were in disgrace; nor was it the shortcomings of the law's minions at which Mr. Hugh's fury was actually hurled; but at a female somebody in the background referred to darkly by them both as 'Her' and 'She'. These scenes were merely Mr. Hugh 'blowing off steam'. Miraculously the lid had remained in position all the way from his home in Chelsea to the office in Holborn, but had flown off at the first epistolary annoyance which had awaited him on his table. And, clearly, this was something with which Goring and his young lieutenant were immensely familiar.

Mr. Hugh, in short, appeared to be unhappily married, and it was obvious upon which side his lieutenants were ranged. For her part, Jessica thought no more than that—from whatever reason—he could never have been an easy person to live with. She asked of any adult normal human being a certain degree of self-restraint under the customary annoyances and irritations of life, partly because she herself had never been allowed to display her own in the family circle nor encouraged to think herself and her affairs of paramount importance. So now she thought of her employer as ill-disciplined, and did not feel that the excuses his lieutenants found for him were at all adequate. If your marriage was so unsuccessful that it made a nervous wreck of you, why not do something about it? Divorce in the section of society to which she belonged was rare; she knew nobody who had been divorced, probably because the financial side of it acted as a brake upon human passions. But to people like the Bardells, to whom money was no object, surely a life of mutual antagonism could be rectified? One could always, she told herself, with all the confidence of untried youth, walk out.

However, she was by no means certain that Mr. Hugh's lieutenants were wholly right, for she felt that even if he lived in Paradise he would not be free from his nervous instability and consequent tantrums. And though these amused the devoted

Goring and Austen they did not amuse her in the slightest degree.

Such rushings in and out, such violent kicking down of the fire-irons, so much angry speech over something which in a few days' time would straighten itself out, she found utterly childish. When, as occasionally happened, he excused himself to her, she found it difficult to muster even the most perfunctory pretence of understanding or any of the usual polite conventional phrases. Her expression alone could she control. It remained blank, indifferent, without a flicker either of regret or distaste. Jessica's lively and usually (so she was told by her family) far too expressive countenance could, in fact, upon occasion become blank as a brick wall. Yet it did, even in its negativeness, say one thing very plainly: *I don't like grown-up children.*

Perhaps Hugh Bardell sensed this, especially on those mornings when, having been in court before coming on to the office, he looked in upon her as he passed her door and asked her to 'give him a few minutes'. She would follow him into his room, watch the angry tossing aside of hat and gloves, stick or umbrella, the familiar kicking down of the fire-irons, as if they grossly offended him, and await his tempestuous torrent of dictation, slung at the solicitor for the other side as if he were the most unreasonable and inefficient person in the whole of the legal profession, upholding his client in every kind of wickedness and deceit. Maybe, Jessica had thought at first, this was the way all solicitors wrote to each other; perhaps it was what was expected, what their clients paid for. But to her, as exemplified in her employer's practice, it seemed to take altogether too extravagant and expensive a toll of nervous energy and self-control. Besides, when she read the letter through to him, he frequently made so many emendations that he would tell her to cancel it and would proceed to re-dictate—a reasonable expression of his case this time, at the close of which he would ask her to read it through, smile at her and say he would like the transcription for signature directly it was ready. And while she transcribed her notes Mr. Hugh would take himself off to his clerk's room, from which,

as she worked, there floated out to her the sounds of masculine laughter. The storm was over once again, the office ran in sweet accord. The spoilt child had worked off his bad temper and resentments.

From the first, however, his manner to her was uniformly courteous, which was no more than she would have expected from the product of public school and university—for all such, she believed in her innocence, did not shout at women. And this, she reflected, was just as well, since she could not have endured the scenes from which Goring and (to a lesser extent) Austen emerged unscathed, armoured apparently by their affection for him and the excuse they found for their cause; and upheld by what seemed to her to be superhuman patience—a quality in no degree whatsoever one of her own outstanding virtues.

As the weeks went by, however, she found him something more than courteous; he showed a disposition to be distinctly friendly, using her interest in books (early evidenced by those he saw in her room) as a line of approach—the one she found hardest to withstand. Moreover, his knowledge of the work she had done on the short-lived *Review* had, she could not but observe, raised her stock considerably.

Nevertheless, she often wished that she knew how to cut short these preliminaries to the day's work—at first because they ate up time, but soon because (for some reason she did not attempt to follow to its conclusion) she felt that he was attempting to establish between them not only a similarity of literary preferences, but a personal link. For her, however, there was no link at all. She remained safely tucked away inside herself, and though she could not refrain from taking up such points as he made about this or that book or author, she heartily wished he would not make them. Or do it much less frequently, or less as if it was something that created a bond between them. To start the day on so personal a note was rapidly becoming a habit with him, and when she tried to make a breakaway by suddenly losing interest in the conversation, contributing no more than a mechanical 'Yes' or 'No', he frequently managed

to find an excuse later on for coming into her room and renewing it.

One such occasion she remembered for some time with considerable annoyance. On the face of it, that afternoon he had a perfectly legitimate reason for his appearance, but it should have occupied him no longer than it took her to write three lines of shorthand at his dictation. As he turned away, however, he caught sight of the book which was her travelling companion for the week, a cheap edition of George's Eliot's *Middlemarch*. This she had taken from her shelves the day before and had started to re-read.

He asked her if she admired the book and this author's work generally, to which she said, "Yes, very much," and in a tone of voice she deliberately made discouraging, but without the desired effect, for he picked up the little volume, turned the rough pages and asked, "You don't find it a little—melancholy?"

It was, she thought, the appropriate adjective for George Eliot's work, but she would not use it.

"Sad, perhaps," she said, her voice still discouraging, her fingers hovering over the keyboard of her Remington. "But the people are so alive you feel you have actually met them."

"I confess," he said, "that I find her a little . . . lowering . . . to the spirit. She did not, perhaps, have quite the courage of the convictions by which she had set her own life. One might perhaps argue that her novels are a warning. Would you not say that?"

There it was again!—that twist to the personal, the invitation to discussion! And this time it was not concerned with the author's creations and their situations but with the author herself and hers. She edged away, saying quietly that she had read the book simply as a novel not as a tract, and at that moment the telephone began to ring, heralding relief, she hoped. Through the half-open door she heard Austen's voice, followed by the clatter of the receiver hurriedly laid down, and by the appearance of that young man's head and shoulders round the side of the door.

"Excuse me, sir, but Miss Bond's wanted on the telephone."

Jessica murmured an excuse and hurried out. The telephone was housed in the outer office, from which her own room opened; it was Austen's sanctum and the un-reassuring waiting-room of clients arriving too early for their appointments.

The caller, as Jessica expected, was Gerald Harwood, keeping his promise, in his own good time, to telephone to see how she was getting on.

"Quite well, thank you," she told him now, wondering if the reverberations of his very distinct voice could be heard by Austen, who, however, had his head bent low over his work. Hugh Bardell, she knew by the snapping door, had retired to his own room.

"What about having a cup of tea with me this afternoon?" asked Gerald. "What time do you leave?"

"Half-past five. Too late, I'm afraid."

"For tea, yes. Could you meet me at six for an early meal instead?"

She was afraid not—she was expected home. Her mother would be very worried. "I've no way of letting her know—we're not on the telephone."

"What about a wire?"

This suggestion she also turned down flat. Her mother, she said, would be just as alarmed by a telegram, if more briefly, as by her delayed appearance.

Gerald accepted that.

"All right, we'll try again a little later. I'll give you better notice. Meantime, don't work too hard. Good-bye for the present."

Jessica hung up and went back to her room, where she put *Middlemarch* back upon the window-ledge from which her employer had removed it, and hunted for the place in her notes at which his entrance had interrupted her. Five minutes earlier Gerald Harwood's telephone call would have earned for him the impatient frown which now went to the debit of Hugh Bardell's account, but, as it was, he had earned a few good marks for his excellent timing.

But no more, for as her quick sight and fingers took up their interrupted task she found her thoughts, to her annoyance,

slipping back to the conversation which his telephone call had so fortunately beheaded. It wasn't only that Hugh Bardell had started a booky conversation when he could see that she was busy, but that she had been uncomfortably aware of the direction in which it was headed. And although she had made it very clear that she had no intention of following it, she could not believe that it had not been deliberate. Yet he must have known, she felt, that she could not possibly discuss with him, however briefly, the theory that in *Middlemarch*—in all George Eliot's books—one could trace the signs of her regret for the decision which had set the lines of her private life. Moreover, the impression she had, so unhappily, been allowed to glean of his own (though he could not be aware of this) made his attempt appear in even poorer taste. But, quite apart from this aspect of the matter, he must have known that she could not possibly be any judge of such a situation.

Talking at the farm with her Aunt Kate about this mutually-admired author, the subject of her irregular union with George Lewes had inevitably cropped up, and they had tried to decide whether the problem of Love without Marriage or Marriage without Love did, in fact, loom as large in the novels as was generally accepted. In the sternness of her attitude to some of her feminine characters, did she really intend to convey a warning?

"It doesn't look," Kate had decided, "as if she ever made up her mind. You could argue for ever about it, and about what I was taught to call her 'negative attitude' to religion."

In the end, they had decided that, at any rate, their author had had courage, and that, whether she was made happy or not by her decision, the young sons of George Lewes certainly were. For their mother had deserted them at a very early age and the woman who stood to them as a stepmother had sat long hours at her desk each day to earn the money for their education which otherwise could not have been forthcoming.

But 'love without marriage', 'marriage without love', were no more than phrases to Jessica, who had as yet no very faintest idea what 'love' in that sense meant.

At this stage in her reflections she pulled herself up sharply,

since her mind, engaged with these odd thoughts, was misleading her fingers. She would put *Middlemarch* back on her shelves when she reached home and carry with her on the morrow something less inimical to her *savoir faire*.

It was a week later, when Jessica was in Goring's, room that one of the by now familiar outbreaks occurred, to end, as usual, in the hasty exit of Mr. Hugh, followed by the sharp snap of what Jessica now mentally called 'the fortress', and the usual comments of the imperturbable Goring. But presently it was discovered that Mr. Hugh had left behind him a document he had thrown down upon Goring's desk and Austen was told to take it in to him.

"Not me!" said that young man. "I'm not going to get *my* head bitten off. I'll wait till he cools down."

"We'll only have him in here again if you don't," Goring said, and added, "Well, give it to Miss Bond—he won't bite *her* head off!"

Ignoring the smile which accompanied this remark, Jessica took the document, tapped on the door of the fortress and, receiving no answer, clicked open the door and went in. Mr. Hugh, who had clearly been standing at the window, staring down upon the Court, turned at the sharp sound of the opening door with a gesture as furious as the expression on his face. Then, as he saw who it was, the scowl was wiped from it and he came away from the window.

Jessica put the document on his desk and said quietly, "Mr. Goring thinks you meant to take this," whereupon he cast a casual glance at it, said, "Oh yes, thank you," and asked if she had 'finished with' Goring. She said she thought not, whereupon he asked her, in a voice from which every sign of his recent fury had vanished, to give him a few minutes when she was through.

It was after she had returned and dictation was under way that Gerald Harwood chose to make his promised telephone call.

"Excuse me, sir," said Austen's voice at the door, "Miss Bond's wanted on the telephone."

Jessica hesitated, looked a little disconcerted, but Mr. Hugh said, "Go along."

"You sound in a hurry," Gerald told her, "so I won't keep you. What about Friday for our meal together? All right?—then six o'clock at the Holborn Restaurant. Can you manage that? Good. Don't be late!"

She said good-bye, hung up the receiver and hurried back to the fortress, when the business of dictation proceeded. Although she was not aware of it, Hugh Bardell's eyes travelled to her face and rested there a good deal of the while. But she did not look up and catch him at it, which was just as well, for, not for the first time, she was oddly sensible of relief when she got back to her own room.

On the Friday Gerald Harwood awaited her in front of a blazing fire in the otherwise deserted entrance hall of the Holborn. They immediately went upstairs, were conducted to a table for two which overlooked the dining-room below and was sufficiently removed from its neighbours to give an air of privacy to the occasion, which compared most favourably with the places in which nowadays Jessica ate something at midday which she called 'lunch'.

She drew off her gloves and looked down and round about with satisfaction.

"You look a little tired," Gerald told her. "Do they overwork you at that office?"

"Oh no."

"But you're not liking it much?"

"I find the work rather dull and the atmosphere fatiguing."

Gerald laughed.

"The answer is in the affirmative. What's wrong about the atmosphere?"

"Oh—it's rather like living with the threat of a thunder-storm day after day."

"Only a threat—no storm?"

"Oh yes, but not in my direction."

"Bad temper or merely irritability?"

"They seem to be the same thing. At least, everlasting irritability makes it seem so."

She gave him, with a light touch, a brief account of Hugh Bardell's moods, saying nothing about the hints of domestic infelicity so casually thrown out, as if in excuse, by Goring, but adding, "He seems to belong to the family of people who are always irritable in the morning."

"He improves, does he, as the day goes on?"

"Usually, but the least thing sets him off again."

"Does he get 'touchy' with you?"

For some reason it annoyed her to have to admit that he did not, and she added, "I fancy his code doesn't allow him to storm at women."

"Not, perhaps, if they happen to be young and nice-looking."

Poker-faced, she said, "But if you're only polite to women who are young and don't squint, surely your code may be said to have broken down?"

This seemed to amuse Gerald as he turned to take the menu from the waiter and passed it over to her, with the request that she choose something substantial. "I expect you had a miserable lunch."

Which happened to be true. After several experiments among the City restaurants, packed with men, she had found one in which she had no sooner begun to feel at home than she was driven from it by the persistent efforts of an habitué to strike up an acquaintance with her. Finding that he could not be snubbed, she had taken herself off to another restaurant, and when presently he turned up there, she was reduced to lunching at teashops, where there was always a good sprinkling of women among the men, and the latter in too much of a hurry to make nuisances of themselves, even if they were the sort addicted to the sport, which she much doubted. It was men from the ranks of what her father called "the City toff", with his black suit and 'topper', who seemed to indulge in this byplay, which so angered and humiliated her she could never bring herself to mention her encounters, so that her mother was still under the impression that she had a solid meal at midday and after the usual tea-tray upon her arrival home could wait, as she had always done, for eight-thirty supper.

So now she chose roast chicken, 'for which Gerald smilingly commended her, and, left to themselves again, he continued to ask about the office and her reactions to it. She thought it a dull conversation, but did not know how to change it. Nor could she understand his continued interest in the head of the firm. How old would he be? She didn't know. Much nearer forty than thirty, she thought. Was he going into the Army? Again, she didn't know. How should she?

"He never talks of the war. But people don't any longer, do they—at least, only incidentally. If there's been an air-raid or something particularly terrible, like the news last month of the shooting of Nurse Cavell in September. The war seems to have become the new background to life."

Gerald agreed that this was so. Life of itself was still interesting and murder as absorbing, if the recent Brides in the Bath case went for anything. But he wasn't, it was clear, to be side-tracked in this fashion, and was soon back again at the subject of the office, remarking that if her employer found civil life so trying it was surprising that he didn't seize the opportunity to escape by joining up.

"Lots of men have done so, I'm sure," he told her, "just to get away from a distasteful job—or an unhappy home life, a nagging wife."

But all Jessica would say to this was that she did not feel that Army life was calculated to make irritable people less so, and that she didn't suppose Mr. Bardell would find it much to his liking anyway. When he wasn't exasperated he was a kindly person, very well read and interested in books.

Gerald didn't inquire how she knew about the book interest. He said, "And too well bred to shout at his young secretary. What would you do if he did?"

"I've no idea. But I should probably answer back in the same vein—and get the sack. I'm not a very patient person, either, you know."

"The signs are not obvious."

"You don't know much about me, I'm afraid. My impatience is a legend in the family. I'm like the girl in the Arnold Bennett novel who wrinkled her nose with annoyance

when her umbrella failed to subside at the first touch of her finger upon the spring."

"Hilda Lessways—oh yes, an odd girl. Never could see what Bennett was up to with her."

"Is Bennett one of the few novelists you read?"

"I don't read him any longer. I read *The Old Wives' Tale* after the *Clayhanger* books, liked it and tried others, but nothing else seemed up to that standard. Do you agree?"

Jessica said yes, she thought she did, and Gerald told her she wasn't drinking her wine, whereupon she gave it some attention, hoping that she had successfully shifted the conversation away from the office and her employer. And so she had, but now it hung fire a little, refusing the avenue labelled 'Arnold Bennett and his Novels' and shying away from the war. So, as the remains of the chicken were borne away, and the second course decided upon, the conversation found itself in a cul-de-sac, from which it was extricated with some difficulty. They had managed better that afternoon in Richmond Park, she thought, when they had traced the story of its old Palace by stepping lightly through some odd pages of English history, but this little trick of discussing the shortcomings of earlier times instead of the catastrophe of their own day could not be repeated. And nothing, Jessica thought now, was to be gained by pretending otherwise.

For here, in November, nineteen fifteen, however little it was discussed, nobody was really thinking about much else. Since the National Registration Bill in June, Conscription had hung in the air—a fact which at home Jessica was never able for very long to forget. The optimistic spirit in which the country had gone to war had faded; there was, indeed, little to be optimistic about. The loss of the *Lusitania* had not, as had been expected (and hoped), brought America into the conflict; and fifteen months of it had served only to impress upon the public mind two things—the strength of Germany and the weakness of Russia. A long series of disasters on that front had blown sky-high the myth of the 'Russian steamroller'.

"Isn't it fantastic." Jessica broke the silence to say, "that the idea of Russia's might should have been a bugbear to us for so

long—and to Germany too? But for that, this war might never have happened.”

“It’s very possible, but I wonder if there’s anything very strange in our acceptance of the legend? The world is run on rumours, half-truths, exaggerations and downright lies. Fear is suborned by those whose interests lie in the unending piling up of armaments.”

“But the stories of Germany’s preparations don’t appear in the least to have been exaggerations. Their military machine is as powerful as it is ruthless.”

“So much so that we are now told on all hands that we are fighting to destroy Prussian militarism! We live in a world of catch-phrases, which Parliament, as a body, does nothing to disperse. Though why should it?—a good battle-cry is half the battle! Trevelyan and Ponsonby made an effort in the Commons a few days ago and Loreburn and Courtney in the Lords, but they were little more than voices crying in the wilderness.”

She asked how his French mother was reacting to the war.

“As you may imagine. It’s her country, not ours or Germany’s, which is being fought over. The fact that she’s not been in it for the best part of twenty years makes no difference.”

“Has she relatives in the war?”

“No very near ones. She had a brother who died several years ago, but he would have been too old for fighting if he were still alive. No, it’s *la belle France* for which her heart bleeds. She has, of course, in peace-time always criticised our refusal to have conscription, and not to have come nearer to it after sixteen months of war than the Derby scheme seems to her beyond excuse. Likewise that at such a time we should permit the trade unions to refuse to have unskilled labour in the munition factories. Mrs. Pankhurst’s report of her visit to those in France has, of course, pointed the moral.”

“And what about the air-raids? The one on London last month when forty people are said to have been killed caused a good deal of comment by no means complimentary to the authorities.”

“Oddly enough, she thought that unreasonable. Air warfare

is something so new she thinks it useless to expect anything like a competent defence at this stage. At the same time, I may say, she was very scornful indeed about the Prime Minister's conclusion that the best defence would be 'darkness and composure'."

It was not until they were walking to Waterloo together that he mentioned again the Union of Democratic Control meeting on the coming Monday at the Memorial Hall, and impressed upon her the advisability of not attending it.

"There's no doubt the Government's line for some time has been to make it difficult for the Society to hold meetings in London by letting the owners of the halls know that they let them at their own risk—that the police would not keep order. The Society has outwitted them a good many times, but I think it won't be done much longer."

"Why," asked Jessica, "is the Government so concerned about a few people who have never interfered with the prosecution of the war? If the Government's case is so good what are they afraid of?"

"Of truth. And their case, as we know, is *not* so good. They're aware that their secret alliances and obligations made it possible for a squabble in the Balkans to fling Western Europe into the cockpit, as Burns, Morley and Trevelyan knew when they resigned. Through the Press the Government discourages free speech, so that people who know something at least of the truth—and that Truth, as someone has said, is the first casualty in any war—won't get a hearing."

"The mob, you mean?"

"And no police protection for free speech."

"What makes you think the disturbance at this meeting on Monday will be so much worse than others?"

"Because it's obvious that trouble is being carefully organised. When we get to Waterloo I'll show you a cutting from a morning newspaper from someone who calls the U.D.C. 'a dangerously pro-German conspiracy', and describes next Monday's meeting as "an act of war' against the British nation."

"I see—an organised attempt to break up the meeting."

"To prevent it being held. You really mustn't go. It'll be a riot. Forged tickets, lying posters, misguided soldiers fed with lies and genuinely believing that everybody who isn't shouting abuse of the Germans is one himself. You'll hear no speeches, not even from them. It will be just a rough-house. But you'd probably never get in—the disorder would begin outside. You must really not go."

But even after she had read the letter Gerald had mentioned, Jessica would not give her promise. She had been to other meetings when there had been interruptions, and had come to no harm. Besides, she had already secured a ticket. It would be a pity to waste it, she told him, as she got into the train and sat down in the rear corner of an empty carriage.

"You're very stubborn, aren't you," he said, closing the door after her.

"Very," she agreed, and to her relief almost at once the train began to move. She sat facing the engine and so he vanished on the instant from her sight, which was eminently satisfactory to her just then. Though the tone in which he had murmured "Good night" had been amiable enough, she felt that he was distinctly annoyed with her; but she couldn't see why, or why he should arrogate to himself the right to object to—to forbid!—her doing something which she had made up her mind to do. If he thought she should not go alone he might have suggested that he should accompany her. She didn't particularly want him to do so—it would have been an innovation, since he had never offered to accompany her to earlier meetings of the U.D.C., or any others, for that matter; but at least it would have been more gracious than this blank forbidding her to go, as if she were a child or a silly creature who hadn't been getting herself about London on her own account since she was seventeen! It occurred to her that perhaps he was afraid. She remembered how he had enjoined upon her the wisdom of not discussing the unpopular view of the war he had been expounding to her.

By Monday morning her decision had hardened and before leaving the house she warned her mother that she might be late,

whereupon Emma said, "Now, Jess, I do *hope* you're not going to one of those meetings of yours—at least, I hope you're not going alone. I'm sure they're very likely to be rowdy. Not that I don't sympathise, as you know. I'm in favour of anything which can help to stop this dreadful war. But your getting an arm broken or your skull cracked won't do any good. And there's sure to be a seething mob."

"If there's a seething mob outside the hall I shan't try to get in," Jessica assured her, for she had as much horror as Emma of getting caught up in a mob, seething or otherwise.

Monday at the office proved a busy day. She had just swallowed the tea Austen had brought in at four o'clock and had settled down to the boring task of transcribing her notes of a draft will, when Mr. Bardell's bell shrilled out above the tap-tap of the typewriter. And this surprised her, since he had been closeted with a client for the past half-hour and she had heard him tell Austen not to put through any calls to his room until the interview was over. However, marking her place in her notebook, she picked it up and her fountain-pen and hurried along to the fortress, where she found her employer and his client in solemn conclave.

"Miss Bond," said the former, "this is Mr. Curtis, who wishes to dictate a letter to you."

Jessica wished Mr. Curtis good afternoon and sat down, but that gentleman, looking much embarrassed, felt called upon to apologise for what he was about to do. He was very sorry to have to dictate so very unpleasant a letter to such a very young lady, he stammered, but Jessica was more embarrassed by his apologies than she felt she would be by the letter. For she knew Mr. Curtis, though she had not hitherto met him, very well by name and was aware that he was engaged in divorcing his wife. For correspondence between the parties had been passing through her hands for some time.

"Believe me, I'm very reluctant to have to impose this upon you," the embarrassed Mr. Curtis went on, and indeed he looked so wretched that Jessica felt that she would like to have told him that she was in her twenty-second year, that she had heard of divorce and knew for what offences a man, in this

country, could divorce his wife. ¹But instead she murmured something reassuring and waited for the dictation to begin.

Certainly the letter was not a pleasant one. To Jessica no letter dealing with such a set of circumstances could possibly have been anything but extremely distasteful. She had not grown up in the generation which took divorce for granted; her own was to be swept into the new morality by the war, and on this particular afternoon in November, nineteen-fifteen, she felt a sympathy with the unfortunate husband whose wife, with four young children, had taken herself off to a lover and wanted of her husband nothing but a divorce, but had seen fit to take two of her children with her. The letter caused both Mr. Curtis and Mr. Hugh considerable difficulty, the former dictating in a painfully apologetic fashion, interrupted at every other sentence by Mr. Hugh, so that it was drafted and re-drafted until Jessica felt that if only they would itemise the facts she could write something which at least embodied them all without qualifying or nullifying each other as was now the case. But at last, after she had read back the final draft—an even more distasteful task than taking it down—she escaped, with Mr. Curtis holding the door open for her, his apologetic face and air of general embarrassment most painful to see.

A long letter, needing care in transcription by reason of the many alterations and emendations it had undergone, if she was not to miss one of them and have to re-type. However, this did not happen, and as she read it through she wondered about this woman, who had been married for eight years and now asserted that not only was she not in love with her husband but had never been. This, thought Jessica, was not to be understood. How did you live with a man for eight years, bear him four children and still maintain that you had never loved him?

Well, then, what was—is—love? thought Jessica, who had felt no glimmering of anything she could possibly have mistaken for it. And what, too, was love's counterfeit?

She took the letter along to the room in which lawyer and client sat talking, to wait while it was read through, and, to her relief, proclaimed at last satisfactory. When it was signed and

handed back to her she was again shown out by the still embarrassed Mr. Curtis, and, having sealed the envelope and handed it over to Austen for posting, she hurried into her own room to clear up the work it had interrupted.

After a short interval she heard, with no small sense of relief, Mr. Bardell and his client go off together. Almost simultaneously Austen put his head round the door to ask how many letters she'd have for posting. She told him, adding, "But you'd better ask Mr. Goring if he can sign them. None of them is important, I think, except the one I brought in to you when Mr. Curtis was here, marked 'Urgent' on the envelope. That *must* go."

"That's stamped all right—I'll see about these."

He swept up the letters she had completed and asked, pointing to the draft will in her typewriter, if 'that' was to go this evening.

"If I finish it in time. But I've been delayed."

"You fixed up?" he asked her, grinning.

"I want to go to a meeting, and I must get something to eat first."

Austen leaned across and examined the document in her typewriter.

"Draft will. No great hurry for that, is there?"

"I expect one day wouldn't make any difference. But I shall probably get it done if there are no more interruptions."

"It's nearly five."

Jessica smiled.

"Are you meeting someone?"

"To tell you the truth, I am. However, here we go. So long!"

He grinned at her and went off with the letters. Jessica finished the draft will in good time, slipped it into its envelope with a 'With Compliments' slip and took it out to Austen.

It was just on half-past five.

She went back to her room, covered up her typewriter and went away to wash and make herself presentable. If she got off without hindrance she would be able to get a meal in comfort before going on to the Memorial Hall. After her tea-room

lunch she was feeling extremely hungry. Anxious as she was to go to the meeting, food she must most certainly have first.

Having collected her book and made sure that she had the ticket for the meeting in her purse, she looked at her watch and saw that it was just on twenty minutes to six. Filled with satisfaction at having got through a busy day with everything cleared off, and also at the stroke of unexpected good fortune which had removed Mr. Bardell with the unfortunate Mr. Curtis, and so made all these things possible, she ran off down the stairs and out into the Court, and saw, coming towards her—Gerald Harwood.

The wind went immediately out of her sails.

"If you think you're going to that meeting, you can think again," he said. "You're coming to have a quiet meal with me and I'm seeing you off safely in the train for home."

"On the contrary," she told him, as they turned out of the Court into the main road.

"Be sensible. I've been reconnoitring. There won't *be* any meeting—only a well-organised row. The speakers won't get *near* the platform. I know what I'm talking about."

Suddenly deflated and for some reason a little angry, she said, "Very well. We can't stand brawling in the public street. I'll go home."

"You need a meal."

"Yes, but I can be home in good time for supper, thank you."

He regarded her calmly. So she had a temper, after all! He had never before seen her even slightly put out. However, there was no doubt she meant what she said. She was going home.

"Very well. Shall we take a bus or would you prefer to walk?"

The bus they needed making its appearance at that moment decided the point. They got into it and found seats. The short journey was punctuated by a few staccato efforts at conversation, all made by Gerald and each in turn killed stone-dead by Jessica's air of complete detachment.

On the station he waited to see her train out, a matter luckily

of only a few minutes. Left to herself, Jessica reviewed the situation which had sprung up so suddenly between them. Certainly she was out of humour, but she had been treated as a child. What possible harm could there have been in going the short distance to the Hall to see what the situation was? Mr. Harwood had taken too much upon himself, invested himself with the right to tell her what she might and might not do. Preposterous! She had taken her own way through life so far without coming to harm, had learned to depend upon herself, and here, suddenly, was this young man, whom she had found it pleasant to see and talk to occasionally, snatching the reins out of her hands and steering her along a course of his own. It was too much. After all, *what was Hecuba to him or he to Hecuba?*

She knew the answer to the last part of that question, anyway. Nothing. And could make a good guess at that to the other half. For Gerald Harwood discussing ideas, world problems and the like was not the young man she had met at Linda Hamilton's party. Her ignorance on these high matters flattered him and, for the rest, well, she didn't squint. If she had, her ignorance, for Gerald Harwood, she was sure, could have gone for ever unenlightened.

"You didn't go to the meeting, then, after all, Jess!" said Emma when she reached home.

"Well, I'm not a ghost," Jessica told her, laughing, her good temper restored by the familiar atmosphere of her home, her parents' welcoming faces, the brightly burning fire.

"Go and take your things off," said Emma, "and then sit and get warm while I dish up."

Oh yes, thought Jessica, this is better than a meal in a restaurant, with Gerald Harwood treating me like a silly child.

But in the morning Emma took the wind out of her sails by saying, "Oh, Jess, what a good thing you decided not to go to that meeting! There seems to have been terrible ructions. Canadian and Australian soldiers, the paper says, broke the meeting up. Where were the police, if you please?"

"Elsewhere," said Jessica. "Obeying orders, doubtless."

Her voice was casual, but she felt exasperated. For Gerald Harwood would be reading the paper also and feeling, she was sure, immensely self-satisfied and superior.

"Mr. Curtis," said Hugh Bardell to Jessica a few days later, "Mr. Curtis would like to make you a small gift by way of apology for the unpleasant task he imposed upon you on Monday."

Jessica, seated at the table, unscrewing the top of her fountain-pen, looked up in considerable surprise and not a little dismay. "Oh, but it was all in the day's work. Mr. Curtis makes too much of the incident," she said.

"All the same, it would please him very much if you would allow him to do as he wishes. He is a furrier and he thought that perhaps a necklet or a fur hat might be acceptable."

"Please thank him for me," Jessica said firmly, "but I couldn't possibly accept any gift."

As Mr. Hugh took his place at the desk and began to turn over his correspondence, already opened, he said, "I'm afraid he will be very disappointed. It would, I know, have given him much pleasure."

To this Jessica made no rejoinder and dictation began. Nor was the matter mentioned between them again.

To say that Jessica was embarrassed is to say little. In the first place, she could not see why both her employer and his client had been made so self-conscious (not to say conscience-stricken!) about a letter dictated in the ordinary way of business. She herself had so taken it and had thought no more of the matter, and she now admitted to herself that she was far more embarrassed by this reference to it than she had been by the letter itself. Having made that admission and made clear her attitude on the subject to her employer, she thought the matter was disposed of.

She was, therefore, considerably surprised when, summoned at the end of the week to the fortress by Mr. Hugh's bell, she arrived to find Mr. Curtis with him, and saw on the table a small cardboard box, which he moved along the table towards her.

"Miss Bond," he said, looking almost as embarrassed as upon the former occasion, "I have taken the liberty of bringing you a little gift which I hope you will accept . . . as an expression of my regret at having had to ask you to undertake so . . . so disagreeable a task the other day. I spoke to Mr. Bardell upon the matter and he thought that you would be so very kind as to accept it."

This time Jessica's embarrassment was at least equal to his own. For a moment words failed her, then she said, "Mr. Bardell did mention the matter to me . . . and I told him that I could not accept such a gift."

"Do not regard it as a gift, my dear young lady . . . but as a little recognition of your . . . kindness."

"The letter was only part of my work here. It does not require special recognition of any sort."

"There you must allow me to differ from you. . . . I am very much in your debt." As he spoke, he lifted the lid of the box and from reams of tissue paper withdrew a small dark fur hat. Jessica looked at it with an expressionless face in which the colour had deepened. Considered as a piece of fur, it was exquisite, but as a present it was both too much and, to her, useless.

She shook her head.

"Indeed, please, I cannot accept it. Quite apart from anything else, I never wear fur."

Mr. Curtis studied her as if she had said that she never ate or drank.

"Never wear fur, my dear young lady? Do you mean you don't *like* it? *All* women like fur!"

"Yes, I daresay. I think it's beautiful, but even if I could afford to buy it I shouldn't—on principle."

The wretched Mr. Curtis just stood and stared down at her. He knew, of course, that there were odd people who held that fur was all obtained by cruel methods, but he had never heard any young woman put forward the belief as a reason for not adorning herself with it.

"This little animal wasn't trapped, my dear young lady, if that is what you mean," he said, as one who was thereby

removing all possible objections to her acceptance of his gift.

Said Jessica, feeling for some reason, between these two males, rather like a little trapped animal herself, "I don't know which animals are and which not, so I prefer to wear the fur of none."

If he thought that it was hardly possible she could ever have had the opportunity of wearing any fur other than squirrel or rabbit, at least he managed to keep it to himself. He laid the hat back among its tissue paper and put on the lid.

"Well, may I leave it . . . in case you change your mind? As I hope you will. It would be doing me a real favour if you could do so."

Now quite overcome with enough embarrassment for all three of them, she said, "I cannot, of course, prevent you from leaving it." She was annoyed that she should have been forced into ungraciousness and resented that she should have been made to appear so churlish, ungrateful and superior. And this she laid to the account of Hugh Bardell, for she felt that she had been very explicit on the matter when he had mentioned it to her, and that he should have made Mr. Curtis understand her attitude and have dissuaded him from pursuing his doubtless well-meant if quite unnecessary intention. Did they imagine, the pair of them, that she was just a silly, vain feminine creature who could not resist the opportunity to adorn herself with finery she could not, left to herself, have afforded?

It was a relief, however, to find that her services at the moment were not required by Mr. Bardell. She had been called into his room for this little . . . occasion. Doubtless, she thought, making good her escape, he too felt in need of an interval for refreshment. And this also was an annoyance, for it would mean a delay in the day's work and the upsetting of her time-table.

Nor was she wrong. Mr. Bardell left his dictation until after lunch, and as it was Friday everything must be cleared off by that evening's post, since the office was shut on Saturdays, which would probably mean a scramble. But it had one advantage—that of making the sitting as business-like as she preferred it to be and left no time for any reference to the

unfortunate *contretemps* earlier in the day, though the cardboard box was still on the table, despised and rejected, she thought, and at the same time a reproach.

She heard Mr. Hugh depart about half an hour later and breathed a sigh of relief. Left uninterrupted, she finished in good time, took everything that required signature into Mr. Goring, collected her belongings and departed. Only as she ran down the stairs did she wonder why she was in such a hurry. The answer was very near the surface of her mind, she found, and, come to think of it, she had felt the same sense of urgency on other evenings this week. She did not want to run into Gerald Harwood, or, worse, to find him awaiting her outside. Indeed, at the moment, she didn't want to renew her acquaintance with him, and hoped that he felt the same way about her. But she couldn't be sure, and it was imperative to get clear of the Court—once in the main street you could avoid and dodge. Cornered by this cul-de-sac, leading nowhere save to this great block of offices, you hadn't an earthly.

As she was still annoyed with Harwood's interference in her plans and his assumption of authority, he was the very last person she wanted to meet this evening. Men generally, in fact, were in her bad books. After Mr. Hugh and the unfortunate and embarrassing Mr. Curtis, Gerald Harwood would be altogether too much. So down the stone staircase she ran as if the devil himself was at her heels, and emerged to find the Court empty. Sidling out into the busy street beyond, she was soon swallowed up in the home-going throng.

Call it a day, she thought.

She was well on the way home when she wondered what had happened to the hat. Was it still sitting in its box on the table in Mr. Hugh's room? If so, perhaps one of the cleaners would take a fancy to it, which would be a relief. Anyway, it couldn't be left long on Mr. Hugh's table. Too silly! But then, the whole thing was silly. Nevertheless, she felt that if she saw it still there in the morning she would feel angry. It would be altogether too childish. But what could she do about it? She might find out Mr. Curtis's business address and send it back to him.

But it was not there in the morning, nor was any reference made to it by Mr. Hugh. She sighed with relief, moved by no curiosity whatsoever as to its fate. That it had disappeared was sufficient.

Upon reaching home the next day, however, there it sat in Emma's little 'hall'. Disguised in brown paper though it was, she knew it at once, but unable to believe her eyes she picked it up and examined the label. Austen's handwriting on that and his neat block-lettering on the brown paper which enveloped the box itself—Miss Jessica Bond, 6 Thelma Road, Fairhill, London S.W. No mistake. She put the box down again and went straight upstairs to get rid of her outdoor clothes and also a little of her exasperation. This was too much—indefensible! And it must have been done by Mr. Hugh's orders. What reason could he have given? If Austen had looked inside, what on earth had he thought? And Goring?—for they were a genial conspiracy. A hat. Mr. Hugh sending her a hat!—a fur hat, too, obviously supplied by Mr. Curtis. She remembered Goring's amused, "Mr. Hugh won't bite *her* head off!"

She went downstairs feeling cold with anger, and walked into the room which in winter-time was used as the sitting-room, exalted to the status of 'dining-room' only in the summer when fires were not needed. As she sat down Ethie made exactly the remark her sister had expected. "Didn't you see the parcel in the hall for you?"

"Yes, thank you," said Jessica politely. So politely that Emma looked up at her quickly, but Jessica's eyes were still on her sister.

"Since you're so interested," she said, "perhaps you'd like to fetch it."

Ethie went off with alacrity, to return with the treasure-trove, and upon her over-powdered face a wide grin of curiosity. She placed the box upon the table, not yet set for supper, and looked expectantly at her sister, who said, "Well, you can't satisfy your curiosity if you don't open it."

Much surprised by this unusually accommodating mood upon the part of her sister, Ethie fetched scissors and promptly got to work. Lifting the lid, she removed layers of tissue paper

and announced, "It's a muff . . . a fur muff . . . Can I take it out?"

"Certainly."

Ethie gave a squeal of delight.

"Oh, it's a *hat*—a fur hat! A *real* fur hat!"

She held it up for general inspection.

"Oh, isn't it lovely! Musquash, isn't it?"

"Don't ask me!" said Jessica, who didn't know one fur from another.

"It must have cost pounds. Is it for you? Wherever did you get it?"

"It was a present. An unsolicited, unwanted and quite useless one."

"Oh, *Jess!*"

"Do you like it?"

"Like it! It's a dream!"

"Then take it!" said her sister. "Otherwise it will remain in its tissue paper until the moths have eaten it!"

"You mean you don't *want* it?"

"I mean exactly that."

Not unreasonably Ethie couldn't believe her luck. That her sister should be given a present like this and say calmly that she didn't want it, that she would never wear it, just didn't make sense.

"But it's worth *pounds!*" she said.

"I daresay. However, if you want it, you're welcome. Take it upstairs out of the way."

Ethie hastened to obey and Emma, looking a little worried, said, "Jess! Is there anything wrong?"

"Why should there be?"

"That's a very expensive present."

"Very. It has a simple explanation. We have a client who is divorcing his wife. He had to dictate to me what he considered an unpleasant letter, and the hat was his apology."

"You mean he spent all that on a fur hat because he'd . . . embarrassed . . . you?" said Emma.

"He hadn't—at least, not as much as he thought, and not by the letter. I'm sure he meant well, but I explained that I don't

wear fur and that I couldn't accept a present for doing the job I was paid to do."

"Well," said Sid, speaking for the first time, "it was pretty generous of 'im to make it such a 'andsome one, my girl."

"The generosity need not worry you too much, Father—he's a furrier."

"But, Jess," persisted Emma, "if you said you wouldn't accept it, why has he sent it on to you?"

"Because it had been brought to the office, and it couldn't just stay there. I can only suppose it was sent out to the junior, with instructions to send it on to me."

"But after you had said you didn't want it?" persisted her mother.

"They didn't believe me, I suppose. Perhaps men just *can't* believe that any girl wouldn't jump at a present of something she can't afford to buy herself. And no man believes there are women who can resist fur."

(Fur and jewellery, she thought, the Achilles heel of my sex! But she could do without either. The primitive woman who must decorate herself to attract the male or outshine other women was very deeply buried in Jessica.)

Emma continued to look a little worried, but her daughter's spirits had considerably improved." For now the unwanted gift was off her hands. But for the fact that she had a sister who welcomed it, the hat would have gone into the dust-bin—a fact which she would like to pass on to her employer, but she knew enough of him by now to feel that he would probably not believe her, and would start another of his peculiarly personal conversations which she always found so embarrassing and which she did not know how to behead. So she decided it would be just as well to leave the matter as it was, and to allow the fact that she never wore the hat to speak for itself.

Nevertheless, she made up her mind to seek another situation and so free herself of this uncomfortable atmosphere, this invasive personal interest in her affairs on the part of her employer. Surely, war or no war, there must somewhere be a newspaper office which could at least use her secretarial services! She might perhaps try an advertisement of her own,

adding to her general qualifications the information that she had had experience in a publishing house. But it was now the end of November; Christmas was in sight, and the time unpropitious. She would leave things as they were until the New Year, unless the advertisement columns of the morning or evening papers offered anything at all inviting.

It was not until the Friday of that week that Gerald Harwood got in touch with her again after their disputatious meeting on the Monday; and by this time her indignation and irritation at what she considered his overbearing attitude had been entirely overlaid by that which had assailed her over the incident of the hat, and also by her satisfaction at having disposed of it so promptly. All the same, she wished that he would not time his telephone calls so that they always interrupted a sitting with Mr. Hugh, or coincided with her appearance in his room or her departure from it. "Mr. Harwood on the phone, please, Miss Bond," seemed always to belong at some point or other to these occasions—a situation which annoyed her as much as it embarrassed her, but as she never knew when Mr. Hugh would ring for her or when Gerald Harwood would go to the telephone, there seemed nothing she could do about the matter. However, it was not long before Mr. Hugh—much to her annoyance, though not entirely to her surprise—was taking an interest in the matter.

"Who is this Mr. Harwood who rings you up so frequently?" he asked her one day.

"A friend," she said, and thought, Now what has it to do with you?

"No more than a friend? You're not engaged?"

"Just a friend," she said.

"Not going to the war?"

"Not yet, I understand."

"Known each other long?"

"Oh yes," she said, but her manner was so unforthcoming that the fount even of Mr. Hugh's curiosity was stemmed. But his last question made Jessica reflect. Just *how* long had she known Gerald Harwood? She'd met him first at Linda's party,

in the June which had preceded the outbreak of war; but they had not met again until the following May, and not again until last September. It gave her a little shock to realise that that first walk in Richmond Park was on the Saturday before she came to work in this office, and that the friendship was actually no older than her acquaintance with Mr. Bardell and his staff. It was since she had started work here that Gerald Harwood had instituted this telephonic communication and made any kind of impact upon her life. And she had just refused on the telephone his suggestion of a walk on the morrow, if the weather was promising. But she had dubbed him 'friend' to Mr. Hugh whose interest in the matter seemed to her to be a presumption.

She had not hunted for excuses for refusing the Saturday jaunt; there was one already to her hand—the afternoons were now too short. Mr. Harwood had accepted this and had said he hoped to see her one evening soon as she left the office. Neither of them referred to their meeting on the Monday of the Memorial Hall disturbance.

These after-office-hours encounters carried their friendship along to the end of the year. Occasionally they went to a theatre, a concert or a debate somewhere, but more often than not it was no more than late tea and a walk to Waterloo; frequently just the walk. On this basis the friendship re-established itself, so that it had about it an air of something much older than it was and something taken for granted. Jessica imagined that sooner or later Gerald would go into the Army and the acquaintanceship sink into the background. But meantime it was pleasant enough, and she flattered herself that she now had the friendship firmly based as she would have it.

It was about the middle of the month that Mr. Bardell announced that he wanted to make a 'determined effort' to catch up with 'Costs', which Jessica found the most boring task of all those that fell to her lot in this office. 'To attending you on the 10th and discussing with you . . .', 'To interviewing your Mr. Martin relative to . . . this that or something else . . . and subsequently informing you that . . .' However,

anything was better than having them hanging over her head, so she resigned herself to a lengthy sitting each day at this dreary task of 'catching up' with them.

Perhaps Mr. Hugh found it as dreary as she did; indeed, Costs seemed always to be on his mind, as if the monetary side of his profession slightly offended him, so that he was glad of anything which might serve as an excuse to interrupt the boring string of facts and figures. One day, hunting through a heap of correspondence upon his desk he paused to look briefly at a photograph which he appeared surprised to find among it.

"Interested in old houses?" he asked, pushing it across to her.

Jessica said she knew nothing of old houses, carefully refraining from any mention of the Lincolnshire farm, in accordance with her policy of never encouraging these sudden switchings to the personal. She glanced at the photo without picking it up and saw that it was of a house of some size and considerable attraction.

"It looks charming," she said politely.

Mr. Hugh explained that it was a 'week-end cottage' in Hampshire which had turned out to be much older than they had believed, so certain work had been undertaken, and this was the result. Luckily everything had been finished just before the outbreak of the war. . . . "You must come down and see it some time," he added, which was the kind of remark to which Jessica thought it quite unnecessary to reply. It was the sort of vague invitation people often threw out, and which usually meant precisely nothing. It surprised her therefore, when, a few days later, the matter was mentioned again. "When will you come down to Deanham?" Jessica was both annoyed and embarrassed. It was as if she were stuck with that fur hat all over again. Mr. Hugh at his tricks.

She said, "I have not yet received an invitation."

"I have just given you one."

"I'm afraid that is not the sort of invitation I could accept."

"Why not?"

"Surely it is obvious?"

There was a moment's silence, then, "Would you come if my wife invited you?"

She hesitated. She wanted to say, "Confound you and your week-end cottage and your invitations!" but what she actually said, and calmly enough, was, "At least that would be a different matter."

The subject, much to her relief, was allowed to rest there.

Christmas came and went, and early in the New Year, as Jessica sat in the late part of the afternoon in Mr. Hugh's room taking 'Costs' dictation, the inner door snapped open and a tall, broadly-built woman sailed into the room, stirring the cup of tea she was carrying. Behind her came Austen, bringing, as usual, cups for Jessica and her employer.

"Are you busy, Hugh?" she asked in a voice which seemed less to ask a question than to dictate a reply. But Mr. Hugh said ungraciously, "I'm always busy," which clearly was not the right answer. He did not introduce the visitor to Jessica; perhaps because it was so obviously unnecessary; nor did he introduce Jessica to the visitor, doubtless for the same reason. But it was at once made clear to Jessica that her own name was not unknown to her; standing there in the middle of the room and still stirring her tea, and looking across at that young woman, she remarked, "This, I presume, is Miss Bond?"

Presume, thought Jessica, who always marked down the people who used it when the word they obviously required was 'assume'. The question, however, went unanswered. Jessica saw no more reason to confirm her own identity than did Mr. Hugh to establish that of the visitor. Nothing was clearer than the fact that he had been talking of her to his wife, which for some reason she found distasteful.

It was Mrs. Hugh, not in the least out of countenance, who spoke. "I hear," she said, her eyes upon Jessica, "that you would like to come down to see the Cottage."

To which Jessica, her colour deepening, replied that the suggestion had been made by Mr. Bardell, and that she had said she could not accept such an invitation.

"Well, will you come if I ask you?"

That, said Jessica, would be a different matter, of course.

"Then shall we say next week-end—Saturday, the eighth?"

A week-end visit had certainly not been in Jessica's mind; nor did she feel that so lengthy a stay would be anything but a visitation, and in any case it annoyed her to have it thought by this hard-faced, self-possessed stranger that she could have so few week-end engagements that the first date thrown at her would suit her. She said, "I'm afraid I couldn't manage next week-end," though this was only another way of saying, "I don't wish to come next week-end," for the 'previous engagement' was entirely mythical.

"Then shall we make it the following one?"

Jessica hesitated. On that Saturday she had, in fact, a walking engagement with Gerald Harwood. However, that could be regarded as a movable feast, so she said, "I'm not sure. . . . I already have an engagement for part of that week-end."

"You seem a much booked-up young woman. . . . Well, we'll fix it—Saturday week, the 15th—provisionally, at any rate. You can let Hugh know one way or the other. If you can come, we shall expect you to lunch at Chelsea—one o'clock sharp. Don't bother with luggage—we shan't dress."

Jessica could never remember whether Mrs. Hugh said 'Good-bye' or 'Good afternoon', or walked straight out of the room without doing either, or what she herself said. One moment she was standing there sipping her tea, her hard acquisitive eyes fixed upon Jessica, the next she was gone, and Mr. Bardell, without a word, was continuing his dictation.

Afterwards Jessica was to wonder why she had allowed herself to be dragooned into paying this visit for which, for some reason, all her instincts clamorously arraigned her. She didn't want to go in the least. It annoyed her that the invitation should have been flung at her as it was, and she was perfectly well aware why it had been proffered at all. Mr. Hugh had 'chatted' and she was to be 'looked over'. Not that she cared in the least what Mrs. Hugh thought of her, but paying visits to people who were strangers and whose way of life was not yours was a waste of time. However, she would probably survive this single occasion, for she remained convinced of the

reason for it, and felt quite sure that no further invitation would be offered (if that word could be said to describe it!) to one who so obviously did not deserve the honour.

But in the end she decided that it would be wiser to get it over and done with. Gerald agreed to release her from the walking engagement, though not very graciously, and the next evening when she left the office he was waiting for her in the Court. By the oddest chance, soon after they had turned out of it, they encountered Mr. Hugh, who had been out all the afternoon and was not expected to return to the office. Jessica did not see him until he was within a few feet of them. He swept off his hat to her, glared at Gerald and tore on as if the devil was at his heels.

Gerald looked back, and saw the furiously striding figure turn into the Court.

"Your boss?" he asked Jessica.

"I shouldn't use the word."

"He looked as though he could murder me. The man's in love with you, my poor child."

"Oh, don't talk such nonsense!"

"I'm not talking nonsense. He expected to get back to the office before you left—and he meets you outside it with another admirer!"

"How unconvincing! Much more likely something went wrong with the afternoon's business and he wanted to dictate a furious epistle and had counted on getting back before five-thirty and so finding me available. But it was well after that when I left. Goring and Austen were both on the wing. If he had wanted someone to wait he should have telephoned. Austen, doubtless, will still be about. He can type, after a fashion."

Said Gerald Harwood, "Do you know, Jessica, I think I should be well advised to refuse, after all, to release you on Saturday week. Which means that I'm of the opinion that you should not go on this jaunt into Hampshire."

"Why not? I don't *want* to go in the least, but it's simpler to go than to keep making excuses. And I shan't be asked again."

"What makes you think so?"

"It doesn't matter why—but I do think so. And I can think of no conviction which could give me more satisfaction."

"Early January seems an odd time of the year to ask anybody for a week-end in the country. Most uninviting."

"Most," Jessica agreed and so definitely shelved the subject for the time being. She had no intention of conveying to Gerald Harwood her own certainty of the reason for the invitation. He must think what he chose.

CHAPTER SIX

THE appointed Saturday was a cold, bleak day and Jessica started out at midday for Chelsea with even less enthusiasm than that with which she had contemplated the trip. She reached the house in good time for lunch, served by an imposing butler and a waiting maid, who stood back against the sideboard when the butler left the room and contrived to look as if she wasn't there at all—or as if *we* aren't, thought Jessica, to whom so much pomp and circumstance over the eating of a simple midday meal for three ordinary people appeared ridiculous. Roast chicken, with the usual accompaniments; no better cooked than it would have been in her own home, Jessica decided, and no more ably carved than it would have been by her mother, who would, however, have done it under the battery of the family gaze, though this would not have disturbed her. Emma was a neat and competent carver, which was just as well, since Sid possessed not even the rudiments of the art, and she knew, too, what part of the bird or joint you liked or did not like. But here you took what came first on the dish offered you, to the accompaniment of a deathly silence as though you took part in some sacred ceremony. Somehow none of the company seemed important enough for an atmosphere so solemn and reverential; nor did the staccato remarks with which her host and hostess stabbed it from time to time do much to enliven matters. And how uncomfortable it was to

pretend that that girl was not standing there by the sideboard, or that she was invisible unless her services were required!

There was no conversation; the occasional staccato remark, sometimes addressed to her, but never developed, doing duty for it. *A party in a parlour, all silent and all damned*, she thought, and wished herself back in the warmth of her own home, wishing also that something would happen to prevent her from going any further with this gloomy week-end programme, wondering why she had ever embarked upon it.

The dreary meal at an end (horrid forerunner of others she must eat until Monday morning?), there was a bustle of preparation for the departure. Jessica wilted at the sight of the large open car which stood at the kerb, for there was a bitter wind abroad and though attired for a winter day she did not feel that she was sufficiently wrapped around for comfort on so long a journey by road under such arctic conditions. Her hostess was enveloped in a fur coat, a motoring veil was tied over her face and hat, her hands thrust into fur gauntlets. Mr. Hugh had a heavy coat, a close-fitting peaked cap, and his hands, too, were fur-clad. Beside these preparations against the worst that could befall, Jessica's serviceable winter coat and felt hat, lightly secured with no more than the usual couple of hat-pins, looked precarious indeed. Nor, since she had been warned not to bring luggage, had she donned her warmest dress, choosing the one which would best fit the several occasions of the week-end—especially the evening meals for which 'we shan't dress'. However, it was useless to dwell upon these matters now, she reflected gloomily, as she got in, sat down, had her share of the rug apportioned her and gave herself up to silent contemplation of the miseries ahead. But when, before taking his seat, Mr. Hugh and the chauffeur took out their watches and solemnly agreed the exact moment of their departure, her spirits sank even lower, for, clearly, these people were among those who still tried to see how quickly a journey by car could be made! Oh God, oh Montreal! she breathed, as the last adjustments were made and the car moved off. The nightmarish journey had begun!

She found every moment of it a misery. The cold wind cut

against her face like a flail; her eyes ached and smarted. Her hands were soon numb, her feet frozen. No one attempted conversation—luckily, since her teeth were chattering and she had no breath to spare. Once Mr. Hugh's hand sought hers under the rug, but she moved it impatiently out of his reach. It was bad enough to face the prospect of being frozen for a couple of hours in this ridiculous contraption without having to suffer unwanted familiarities. She shut her eyes and resigned herself to enduring what could not be escaped; but to no more.

The drive, however, was nearly as silent as the lunch had been, which was all that could be said in its favour. And long before they had left London and its outskirts behind she was too cold even to be sorry for herself. When she was told that they were crossing Hindhead and invited to look down upon the Devil's Punch Bowl on her right, she found it difficult to turn her head. She felt that she had almost entirely turned to stone, and they weren't out of Surrey yet! She wanted nothing but that the car should break down or that someone should tell the chauffeur to go more slowly. Neither of these things, however, happened, and after an eternity the car drew up at what appeared to be a high wall. Owner and chauffeur at once performed their trick with their watches whilst she climbed stiffly out of the car and made her way to the iron gate in the wall which her hostess had already pushed open and walked on to the house, at the open door of which a maid stood to take the various cases and packages which had travelled with them, and eventually to show Jessica to her room.

The sight of that was her first pleasurable moment since she had left home, for on the hearth blazed a bright fire. Walking straight across to it she sank down before it and, stripping off her gloves, held out her frozen hands towards the warmth. The maid, having deposited her insignificant little case in what she considered was the appropriate place, said, "I expect you've had a cold journey down, madam?"

"Freezing," said Jessica. "I've never been so cold in my life. This fire is heaven!"

"You will find a nice one downstairs, madam. And tea is ready when you are—that will warm you up," said the girl

kindly, slipping out of the room and shutting the door softly after her.

Nothing but the tea bell, Jessica thought, could have moved her from the hearth rug. She walked across to the dressing-table, pausing to glance out through the small french window which gave on to a narrow railed-in veranda. She could see only an expanse of grass and wintry trees, and did not find it any compensation for the cold drive or its painful results. Obviously, she was one of the people for whom motoring had no joys and could only be undertaken at the cost of a ruined appearance and considerable discomfort. But how did *anyone* think it a good idea to drive for sixty-odd miles as fast as possible in the teeth of a bitter wind in an open car, in mid-winter? And to let a guest come all unprepared for the sacrifice! If only Mr. Hugh had said, "We have an open car—you will need to wrap up." He said so many things she had no wish to hear, but not anything sensible or practical!

One look in the mirror told her that there was nothing to be done for her face, which simply shrieked for the calamine lotion she had not thought to bring with her, not anticipating so harsh a journey. Powder was worse than useless. She combed through the tiny ringlets which always escaped from the thick swathes of bright hair brushed back from her face, frowned at herself in the glass and went downstairs. She did not feel at her best and, as is usual at such times, did not feel equal to sustaining what she thought of as the prospective rigours of this undesired week-end.

The maid who had taken her to her room was hovering in the hall downstairs, smiled upon her and showed her into the room where her host and hostess sat with cups of tea in their hands. Mr. Hugh rose until she had seated herself. It was the maid who poured out a cup of tea and offered it to her, together with the sugar basin and a plate of biscuits, at which she shook her head.

During this short interval Mrs. Hugh remarked, in a voice utterly lacking in concern, "You seem to have caught the wind, Miss Bond. Do you know this part of the globe?"

"Hampshire? No."

"Here, of course, we're very near the Sussex and Surrey borders," put in Mr. Hugh, as if excusing something or someone.

"I don't know those counties either very well, I'm afraid," said Jessica.

"Not even Brighton? I thought all Londoners knew that part of Sussex, at least," Mrs. Hugh remarked.

"I once went there as a small girl. But all my memorable holidays have been in Lincolnshire."

"Oh, that's very dull and flat, surely?"

"Flat but not by any means dull," Jessica defended it.

"Probably an acquired taste," said Mrs. Hugh.

Slowly Jessica began to thaw—physically, but by no means in any other way. For it was clear that her hostess was going to make no effort to put her at her ease, and what few conversational hares she herself started soon ceased to run. Beneath the eye of the basilisk it was clear, too, that Mr. Hugh would not be much help, and Jessica's own state was such as to cause her distinct embarrassment. Having made the only possible answers to such comments as her host and hostess vouchsafed, she felt herself struck dumb by the very fear of being silent. It was therefore a relief when her hostess rose and remarked, "Well, we'll leave you to thaw out."

Mr. Hugh rose, too, as if that deliberate plural were an irresistible magnet, but he lingered at the door to say, indicating the best part of one wall, "You'll find plenty of reading matter to your taste, if you wish." After which effort he trotted obediently after his wife. Jessica rose and stood looking down into the fire, holding out a foot towards its glow. This was going to be a very unpleasing week-end, she feared, and wished herself back home, where the manners were distinctly better. Why, she wondered, had the children not put in an appearance? She would have expected them to have come running out to welcome their parents, if not to meet the tiresome visitor. When the maid who had shown her to her room came in to clear the tea-things she asked about them.

"They were having tea when you arrived, madam—except

on Sundays at lunch-time they take their meals in the school-room with their governess."

"So I shall see them to-morrow, shall I?" asked Jessica, thinking what dull lives the rich made for themselves.

"Yes, madam. Are you fond of children?"

"I've not had much to do with them, but I have a brother just over four years younger than I am, and as a little girl I loved him dearly. And since he left home I've missed him very much."

"Has he gone to the war, madam?"

"He's not old enough yet, but when he left school he went into the country to learn farming, so I only see him at holiday times."

At this point she moved back from the now brightly-burning fire and the girl said, "The wind has caught your face, madam."

"Yes, and I've brought nothing to put on it, unfortunately. It's too sore for my cold cream. I'm afraid I didn't realise the car would be an open one or that we should drive so fast."

"I have some calamine lotion, madam. Shall I put it in your room for you to use to-night? The air's strong here—we're quite high up, you know. Cook and I find it very useful."

"Oh, would you? That would be most kind."

"Not at all, madam," said the girl, picking up the tray. Jessica opened the door for her and as she went out she said, "Dinner is at seven o'clock, madam."

Well, Jessica reflected, not without satisfaction, there was a good hour before that jolly occasion and she might as well find something to read. This was the first time in her life she had gone from home without a book and why she had imagined that this visit would leave her no time for reading she couldn't imagine. Moving over to the bookcase, she opened the doors and stood for a moment gazing upon the lovely spines turned towards her. Were they, she wondered, for show, or did anyone ever take out a volume and read it? No cheap, popular editions here—no Everymans, World's Classics or other such series; but there seemed to be everything one could look for in the sphere of *belles lettres*. Yet these lovely volumes, she felt,

would never belong to their owner as her own 'cheaps' belonged to her, worn, shabby and lovingly annotated from her school-days and her University Extension Lecture Course. She found these aristocrats a little intimidating—as if she must apologise for intruding upon their solitude. They didn't look, somehow, as if they were meant to be read and enjoyed; but merely to serve as an ornament to the room, adding colour, grace and a suggestion of culture. However, she had been invited to make use of them, and so she ran her quick gaze along the shelves, and presently put out a hand and carefully detached a little volume of Hazlitt's Essays from its fellows. It was some time since she had looked at them, but Hazlitt was a great favourite of hers, and shutting up the case she retired with him to a comfortable distance from the fire—and in his company sat absorbed and happy for the first time that day, until the sound of the gong made her look up quickly at the clock. Half-past six, so it must be the signal for those who needed to change or 'tidy up', a matter which would occupy a very little time, so far as she was concerned. So she read peacefully on for another quarter of an hour, and then, reluctantly closing the volume and putting it back carefully in its own niche, she shut it away and went up to her room.

As she reached the upper landing the sound of voices from another room abruptly died away and the door which had been ajar was clicked shut just as she opened that of her own. She shut this after herself with sharp precision, and, standing back against it, found herself playing with the idea of putting on her hat and coat, leaving the house and making for the station, though goodness alone knew where it was!

To be pressed into consenting to this visit, as she had been, and then to be treated with scarcely common civility infuriated her. Contemptuous as she felt towards her hostess's manners, there seemed no word by which to describe what she felt for the pusillanimity of her host. He seemed afraid to open his mouth, if not above trying to hold her hand beneath the car rug! Had his lady wife seen that gesture? If so, then she must have seen her instant rejection of it. Or had she rushed to the conclusion that such behaviour was usual, and normally allowed by her?

Or was she just determined, by her own behaviour, to make it impossible for her guest to behave naturally, or to allow any kind of normal conversation to develop? In short, was she determined to demonstrate to her husband that the guest he had forced upon her was a dull creature from a lower social stratum whom merely to see in his own setting would afford him a much-needed lesson? But in that case . . . Jessica snapped this train of thought off abruptly since it was taking her much too far.

She washed her hands, tenderly dusted her sore face with powder, and then walked across to the fire and stood there until the dinner gong rang, when, gathering her dignity about her, she opened her door and went downstairs. In the hall the friendly maid was hovering and at once opened the door by which she stood. Jessica stepped inside to find the room empty, though a clock somewhere in the house had chimed the hour as she had come downstairs. She stood by the fire gazing around—at the oval table gleaming with heavy silver and sparkling glass, at the dark blue heavy velvet curtains drawn across the window (which she felt sure was shut, so sharp was her sense of claustrophobia), at the thickly-piled matching carpet, the deep ultra-modern chair by the fire. It didn't, any of it, seem to her in the least like a country cottage. When she thought of the Lincolnshire farmhouse, shabby, and so welcoming, this expensive-looking place wasn't a home at all, but a shop window in one of the more expensive-looking furnishing houses in London—a replica in miniature of the house in Chelsea at which she had had lunch. It took more than the skill of the builder and a full purse to convert an old cottage into a home. Cottage into house was another, and quite different, matter.

She was abruptly detached from these reflections by the opening of the door and the appearance of her host and hostess—in full evening dress! Poker-faced, hiding both her contempt for her hostess and her satisfaction in having this proof of her deliberate policy over this week-end visit, she took the seat suggested to her. It left her with the length of the table to herself, her back to the window, with her host and hostess

facing each other at either end of the table. Mr. Hugh looked glum and uncomfortable, and her thoughts for a moment ceased to play scornfully about his role in his own home, while she wondered why she hadn't suspected that idly thrown-out, "We shan't dress," and packed the finery she had worn at Linda's party. Judging by her hostess's gown, it would still pass muster as to style. The odd and regrettable things that were shortly to happen to women's clothes had not yet seized upon them.

The meal began as gaily, Jessica thought, as a funeral. Mr. Hugh's expression was now one of mingled misery and ill-temper. He could not be liking very much the figure he was cutting, but why had he expected anything else? She had no flicker of sympathy for him, not even when she looked at his wife, wearing the expression of one whose strategy has been even more successful than she hoped; but Jessica noticed that she did not look at *her*, which she considered a pity. For if she believed that she had put her guest out of countenance, she was vastly mistaken—all she had done, so far as Jessica was concerned, was to put herself out of court. But she was not aware of it. She looked at once both self-satisfied and derisive, and Jessica was visited by a terrible desire to smack the expression off her face. No one spoke while soup was served, bread handed, and the maid withdrew, and, for all Jessica's inward fury, she sat there looking as if she believed herself to be a welcome guest. Having, as he drank his soup, snapped out one or two remarks to his wife, Mr. Hugh turned to Jessica and vaguely apologised for having left her to herself for so long. But his lady wife was not having this.

"My dear Hugh," she said, "I'm sure Miss Bond must have been very glad to rest after what was evidently a very trying journey for her."

"No, merely a very cold one," Jessica said. "I had no idea I should be driving in an open car, or I should have taken care to have been more suitably attired."

"Did you find something to read that interested you?" inquired Mr. Hugh, looking at her with a glance half-grateful, half-admiring.

"That was not at all difficult," she told him. "From an abundance of riches I chose Hazlitt."

"And did you find him of interest?" asked Mrs. Hugh.

"Indeed, yes—he's a very delightful essayist, and it is some time since I last spent an hour in his company."

"Do you ever read fiction, or is that quite beneath your notice?"

"Far from it. I have a fair acquaintance, I think, with the work of modern novelists, but I've always been as interested in general literature as in fiction."

"I think I have mentioned," said Mr. Hugh, "that Miss Bond did a three years' course in English at King's College."

"I daresay you did, Hugh, but then I've heard so much about Miss Bond . . ." She turned to Jessica and asked, "But do you find it of use in your commercial career?"

"It wasn't for that purpose I took the course, although I did find it of considerable use when I was on the staff of *Woman's Review*. English literature has always been to me more interesting than anything else. It's something you study for itself alone."

"What work did you do on the *Review*?"

"I was engaged as secretary to the sub-editress, but I was later entrusted with some sub-editorial duties and learned how a paper was made up and put to Press, and was also allowed to put forward ideas for contributions. When the war came, and the staff thinned out, I took on the sub-editing."

"The paper, I believe, soon came to an end?"

"It suffered the fate, unfortunately, of many periodicals since the beginning of the war," said Jessica, politely ignoring the suggestion which underlay that smooth innocent-seeming inquiry. "I think it was a great pity. There are too few papers for intelligent women."

"I suppose, when the war ends, you will try to get a post on another paper? You must find a legal office very dull."

"I don't know what I shall do. I'm afraid I've given it no thought—the end of the war seems such a very long way off."

The soup plates were removed. Cutlets were handed. Mr.

Hugh offered wine. Red or white? She hesitated, then saw that the white was Montrachet and chose that, for she had already learned that Montrachet would go all the way with you through a meal, being neither too sweet for meat nor too heavy for fish. Her host followed suit, her hostess elected to drink the Corton.

But the wine did nothing to enliven the meal. The conversation was desultory in the extreme, and every now and then silence fell like a blanket, while Jessica racked her brains for a theme which would last for more than the couple of minutes it took to dismiss it. She wished she had been born a babbler, an 'agreeable rattle'; that she didn't see so clearly what her hostess was after, or that her host had the courage to queer her pitch. If she profoundly disliked his wife, she was aware that she was developing a very real contempt for Mr. Hugh. Having been the cause of her presence in his house, the least he could do, she felt, would be to see that common civility was accorded her. She found herself despising him for, as her father would say, letting his wife wear the trousers, though in her own home, for all her mother was the manager, it would never have occurred to her father to use the phrase of her; nothing would have been less true.

While she was still struggling after something to say, Mr. Hugh came to the rescue by asking her which of the Hazlitt Essays she liked best. With any luck, and provided that she could remember the titles of any of them, this theme should last them for as long as five minutes. She said, plunging, "I like them all save the one on Boxing, but particularly I like *Merry England*, and that on *Persons One would have Liked to have Met*."

"What about *Conversation of Authors*?" Mr. Hugh suddenly came to life and threw in. For all the world, she thought, as if he had accepted a dare to make a contribution to the topic.

"Yes, that too," she said.

"Do you two always agree about everything? Tell me, Miss Bond, did Hazlitt really *believe* we were a merry nation, or *was* he being sarcastic? I ask for information. I make no pretensions to having read the essay."

Odd, thought Jessica, how offensive she can make the

simplest remark! She did not reply at once, hoping Mr. Hugh would fill the bill, but as he clearly did not mean to do so, she said, "Oh yes, he was quite sincere. He calls us 'the merriest people in the world' and makes out a very good case for his contention."

But she had no intention of stating it and Mrs. Hugh, luckily, showed no desire for further enlightenment, contenting herself by saying, "Well, he lived quite a while ago. Perhaps then we were a little gayer than we are to-day."

The entry of the maid allowed this remark to fall into silence, and while apple tart and cream were handed Jessica tried to remember what would have been happening in England in Hazlitt's day. The American War of Independence must have been ending about the time of his birth. The French Revolution had begun while he was a schoolboy, and though he refused later in life to regard it as anything but the 'noblest event recorded in history,' it had produced a reaction in England quite fatal to reforms of any sort. Nor could the effect of the Napoleonic wars have done much to improve matters. It certainly didn't look, on the face of it, as if 'merri-ment' could in those days be more hopefully looked for than in our own.

Whilst she had been delving in the past the conversation which had moved her to it had petered out, and the excellent tart and cream was eaten in a silence broken only by her own inquiry as to whether the apples came from the garden. Mr. Hugh said, "Yes. You must look round to-morrow—we think it rather attractive." Surely, she thought, the first normal remark that had been made since her arrival!

• Coffee was served at table. Mrs. Hugh declined it and upbraided her husband for not doing so. "You know you never sleep at night if you drink coffee last thing!" she told him, a statement he did not deny, and it occurred to Jessica that he had only taken it that evening to keep her in countenance!

The meal at an end at last, Mrs. Hugh went at once out of the room, and Jessica sat on the arm of the deep chair by the fire and stared at the empty hours which stretched yawning

away to the earliest possible moment when she could betake herself to bed. The maid came in and cleared the table, during which Mr. Hugh, after one or two staccato remarks, stood in silence by the fire, smoking his cigarette very quickly, as if he was timing himself as he had timed the journey down. Jessica could think of little to say, and after the maid withdrew silence fell between them. The artificial conversation at the dinner-table had left her denuded of words. To be short of easy talk at the office with Mr. Hugh in the role of employer was familiar enough and did not bother her; but here, in the respective roles of host and guest, when conversation should have been easy and pleasurable—when, indeed, it had become almost a crying need—all he could produce were these nervous, apologetic blurts and she, finding herself alone with him, could not manage even the smallest of small talk.

The whole position both embarrassed and angered her. This was a situation, she felt, which should never have been imposed upon her. Her indignation at the treatment so far meted out to her was considerable and rising, for nothing would ever convince her that Mr. Hugh was not perfectly well aware for what reason his wife had seconded his invitation—had, indeed, made it almost impossible for her to refuse it except at the cost of being impossibly blunt and saying flatly that she did not wish to accept. Mr. Hugh, therefore must have known very well the kind of treatment which would be accorded her and he should have found some excuse for cancelling the visit.

If it was true (and indeed it seemed impossible to believe otherwise) that they did not get on together, Mrs. Hugh would, of course, put only one construction upon his interest in any other woman, whoever she was. The fact that she happened to be employed as her husband's amanuensis merely made it easier for her to carry out her tactics, which were those of a character in an early play of Somerset Maugham's which had once made her so angry, in which a bishop had invited the young man (earning two hundred and fifty a year, and in a bank, she thought) with whom his daughter avowed herself in love, to tea, hoping that his table manners would put her off. She couldn't remember whether the young man passed the test

or not, but she did remember how angry she had been because the snobs in the pit had found the play amusing and had applauded appreciatively, apparently unaware that it was their own class which was being maligned and held up to ridicule.

She slipped off the arm of the chair into the chair itself, where, however, she felt at a disadvantage, since if she leant back her feet barely touched the floor. So she sat up and hitched herself somehow against the side. The only way to be comfortable in such a chair was to curl up in it, but that, in the circumstances, was out of the question.

It was nearly nine o'clock before Mrs. Hugh came back into the room, opening the door with a suddenness that might have been the gesture of a hostess aware that she had been a little neglectful of a guest. But was *not*, Jessica thought. . . .

"Why are you sitting here?" she exclaimed. "There's a much better fire in the drawing-room. It's a lovely night, Hugh. Why don't you take Miss Bond up on the tower to look at it?"

Jessica, with some haste, excused herself. It would be cold and she was rather tired.

"The wind's quite dropped," Mrs. Hugh said, "but as you please, of course . . ."

"Perhaps to-morrow," Jessica temporised. "Unless we shall be returning to town?"

"We return on Monday morning. If you are so tired perhaps you would like to go to bed?"

"If you would excuse me, I should," Jessica said, and edged herself out of the chair.

Mr. Hugh rose and opened the door for her.

• "Good night," she said, and as the door closed behind her she felt as if she was escaping from prison and had been handed the keys of heaven.

On the Sunday morning, after a good night's sleep, Jessica awoke early. When the maid brought in tea and drew back the curtains she saw that the new day was bright and sunny. Breakfast was at nine, she was told, and the bathroom next to her room was for her use when she was ready. So, having

drunk her tea and with nothing to read, she decided, after a short interval, to take her bath and go into the garden and reconnoitre. The fire, however, had burnt itself out during the night, and it was some time before she could brave herself to leave her warm bed; and the clock in the hall was striking half-past eight when she walked downstairs. Turning up her coat-collar and pulling down the brim of her hat, she let herself out by the door at the far end of the hall into the garden.

From the comfort of her bed the day had looked more inviting than it proved to be. For the same strong wind ran across the world, still roaring out of the east like some monster seeking whom it might devour. She held the ends of the collar of her coat so that she secured a little protection for her face, out of which the calamine had taken a good deal of the soreness. She walked briskly along, gazing around with delighted admiration and feeling that her host's 'rather attractive' was a considerable under-statement. At the far end of the lawn she stood still to look at the climbing view beyond the garden and wondered what the hill was that dominated it; but this was a part of England to which she was a stranger, and across it the wind was driving so furiously that she soon turned her back on the view and began to make her way back to the house.

As she went she saw it for the first time, standing on the left of the valley. Having thought of it as an old house, it surprised her to see how very clean and polished it looked, and so little did she know about building she had no very faintest idea as to how much or what part of it was ancient, but as she stood and gazed at it, it appeared a very haunt of peace in a war-ridden world; but so far, she reflected, it was not peace she had encountered within its walls. Travelling upwards, her eyes came to rest upon the square tower to which Mrs. Hugh the previous evening had suggested, her introduction by her husband. She stood still, gazing up at it, wondering if it belonged to the ancient part of the structure or to the modern additions, though it must, she thought, belong to the former, for would anyone building a house to-day add a tower from which to survey the surrounding countryside? She thought

suddenly of Henry James's story of the happenings at Bly, which was equipped with a tower, whereupon the governess had seen the horrible apparition of Quint standing apparently looking down upon the garden . . . no, looking for *somebody*. But on this wild and bitter morning that horror would not walk. At this point her reverie was interrupted by the sound of youthful voices and she found herself caught by the hands and urged at a run back along the way she had come.

"You must be Miss Bond," said the girl. "Daddy has told us about you. I'm Sue and this is my brother, Charles."

Jessica acknowledged these introductions and Sue asked, "What is your Christian name? . . . Jessica? . . . pretty, but what a lot to say. *My* name is Susannah, but nobody ever calls me by it. Not even Miss Perryman—she's our governess."

"Oh, I'm very seldom given my full name, either," Jessica told her. "Much more often I'm called 'Jess' and sometimes Jessie."

"And *I'm* always called 'Charles' and *never* 'Charlie'," said the boy.

"Charles is much the nicer," Jessica assured him. "And now, please, will you tell me the name of the hill that seems to be keeping his eye on us wherever we are in this garden."

Sue laughed and said, "So he does. I've never thought of that before . . . only that we can always see *him*!"

"He's Petersfield's mountain," said Charles. "He's nearly nine hundred feet high."

"Oh, goody!" chimed in his sister. "It isn't going to rain today."

"How can you be so sure?" Jessica asked her, though indeed, with this wind from the east, rain certainly seemed unlikely.

"Oh, it only rains when Butser's smoking his pipe," Sue assured her, "when there's a mist round his head."

"It's the other way round!" cried her brother. "When there's a mist it means fine weather—and heat! We shan't have any of *that* to-day."

There was no time to argue out that point, for a female figure emerged from the house, and "Oh, bother!—here's

Miss Perryman," cried Sue. "We must run—come on, Charles!—race you!"

Jessica left the running to the children and herself walked at a normal pace towards the house. By the time she reached it neither governess nor children were to be seen, and her host and hostess were just entering the dining-room.

'Good mornings' were exchanged, but her hostess did not inquire what sort of night she had had, doubtless for the very good reason that she didn't care. For the sake of filling in the yawning silence, Jessica remarked that she had come down rather early and been into the garden, which statement appeared to have fallen into a pool of silence, with Mr. Hugh hauling it up at the last moment by asking what she thought of it.

Jessica said she thought it richly deserved his description of 'attractive' but without the adverb.

"What adverb did I use?" he asked, smiling.

"'Rather'," she said, smiling too.

"Oh, Hugh always belittles in speech what he most admires," exclaimed his wife, but without a smile. "It's become a habit with him. You should really take yourself in hand, Hugh. You know Deanham is everything to you—quite apart from the small fortune you've spent upon it."

The maid at Jessica's side was offering bacon and tomatoes, to which she acceded, longing for a plate of porridge. Hugh, refusing the proffered dish, said, somewhat to her surprise, "What one likes oneself is not necessarily as attractive to others."

"Indeed, yes; but I've yet to meet the person," his wife replied, "who does not admire Deanham Manor—especially since our restoration efforts."

"How old is the house?" Jessica ventured to inquire.

"We are given to understand that there was certainly a Manor House here in mid-fourteenth century," Mrs. Hugh told her.

A little put off by that tiresome 'We are given to understand', Jessica was nevertheless delighted to have a real subject for conversation at last, and one of particular interest to her. "Do

you suppose," she asked, "that it could actually have been a part of the manorial system of life in feudal England—with a lord of the Manor, and a reeve and tenants and villeins to render him all essential services? Only in that case, I suppose, it would have been built much earlier."

"Earlier than the fourteenth? Why?"

"Well, it was about then, I think, that the manorial system must have begun to break down, because of an Act passed in the previous century which stopped the making of new manors, and gradually brought landowners into direct tenancy with the Crown."

To her surprise, Mr. Hugh, who had been eating a boiled egg with every sign of profound gloom and complete deafness, here chimed in. "Quite right. Reign of Edward I. Statute of Westminster Third."

"I'd forgotten what it was called, but I remember what it set out to do," said Jessica, realising regretfully that this promising line of conversation was now at an end. Bad enough that she should have exhibited her scrap of knowledge, but quite fatal that Mr. Hugh should have confirmed and amplified it. It didn't seem very easy to start another hare. Her reference to her encounter with the children in the garden led nowhere (except to a comment from their mother that they had no right to be out there in the wind without being wrapped up); and with Mr. Hugh now returned to silent communion with his egg, nothing was to be hoped for from that direction.

She was very glad when the meal came to an end but distinctly deflated when Mrs. Hugh said briskly, as one who had everything planned, even the day of judgment, "Well, Hugh, you'd better take Miss Bond for a walk. Lunch at one promptly." And having thus settled Jessica's morning for her, she rose and went from the room.

Left alone with her host, Jessica expected him to redress the hospitality balance by inquiring whether or not she would care to go for a walk; but he did nothing of the kind. He'd been told to take his guest for a walk and that, for him, only too clearly, was all there was to it. So Jessica went upstairs, put on her far from adequate outdoor clothing, and gazed mournfully

at the angrily waving trees beyond the window. If the wind she had encountered in the garden before breakfast was still strong and hurtling, like a fiend, up and down in this part of the world, the improvement in her wind-grieved face would, she felt, be almost entirely nullified. But anyway, she reflected, the cold walk could hardly be less to her liking than spending the morning in the house, where, so obviously, she was regarded as a tiresome supernumerary.

Her host awaited her in the hall, attired in the warm overcoat in which he had painlessly sustained Saturday's hideous journey. The collar was turned up about his ears and he was drawing on to his hands the fine gauntlet gloves she had remarked with so much envy on the same occasion.

They set forth. He did not suggest to her any particular direction, doubtless because her unfamiliarity with the neighbourhood would reduce any suggestion she might make to just so many words. In view of the arctic wind, however, she had expected him to choose as sheltered a route as possible in what appeared to her to be a part of the world singularly lacking in sheltered or partially-sheltered spots. From what he said—and the place-names meant nothing to her—she gathered that he appeared to think the panorama the walk afforded was the only thing that mattered. Once or twice as they walked she paused and looked about her, but less in order to admire the view, fine though it was, than because the wind had brought back the pain in her chest. Her only consolation as they moved on again was that the return journey must be downwards and with the wind behind them.

But it was clear as they went that Mr. Hugh had no thought as yet of returning. Only too clearly they were walking from A back to A in a wide circle, via most of the other letters of the alphabet. Good walker though Jessica was, most of her walking had been done in a much gentler terrain. Even so, she would not have expected to be noticeably distressed by hills, rough going and a strong, cold wind; nor so grateful when Mr. Hugh occasionally called a halt in order to point out some interesting aspect of the walk to be seen through a gap in the trees as they climbed—the country stretching away over the

Surrey border⁴ to Hindhead, or the summit of Butser, which looked so near to the hill they were climbing but was in fact five or six miles away. The halts, ⁴however, were few. Mr. Hugh seemed to have been seized by a veritable passion for celerity and for walking for walking's sake, as if he had put certain muscles into action and had forgotten how to bring them to a stop. They seemed, to Jessica, to have been walking for ages, but she saw, when she looked at her watch, that it was for only a little over an hour.

"You should see these hangers in autumn," Mr. Hugh told her. "The common tree here is the birch and at that time of the year the colour is astonishing. You're very quiet. Are you tired?"

"I find it impossible to talk in this wind," said Jessica, hastily raising a hand to her hat, at which the wind tugged as if determined to snatch it from her head. Seeing the gesture, Mr. Hugh said, "You should have worn the fur hat—just the weather for it. Do you ever wear it?"

"No," said Jessica.

"You mean never to wear it?"

"This is an old and unrewarding argument."

He took her by the arm with a gesture from which she instantly dissociated herself. "You're very stubborn, aren't you," he said.

"I say what I mean," she said quietly, "and act accordingly. And do please let us walk on. I find it very cold. Surely we must be very high up here?"

He removed his hand from her arm. "Not very," he said. "This isn't Butser, you know."

"Is Butser the local giant?" she asked as they moved on.

"With the exception of Walbury Hill, on the Berkshire border."

"Are we not still climbing?" she said a few minutes later, in a voice out of which she hoped she had kept the note of anxiety.

"We shall soon be working our way down."

"To Jessica, however, it seemed that 'soon' was a long while coming, for they were certainly still climbing and, as far as she could see, the path ahead showed no sign of doing anything

else. Moreover, she saw that her companion was now looking about him with an expression upon his face which suggested that at least he suspected as much. At last he was compelled to stop and admit that he had taken a wrong track, and that they must go back. However, they were now walking down, for the first time for hours, Jessica thought, and, soon arriving at the point where they had mistakenly branched off, Mr. Hugh took the track straight ahead and assured her that it would go down steadily all the way to the road, and land them within half an hour's walk of Deanham and its Manor House.

Jessica glanced at her watch and decided that however quickly they walked they would be late for lunch. It was clear that Mr. Hugh was revolving the same thought, for his face continued to look slightly harassed, and as they set out, with the wind mercifully at last at their backs, he said, "Stupid of me to have missed this path—it has wasted nearly half an hour. Are you feeling very tired?"

"No—it's better down from the heights and with the wind no longer against us."

All the same, the pace they were making was sharp, and Jessica was unpleasantly conscious of the determined ache in her chest and of the smarting of her face. She wished again that her hostess (her mental use of the word was heavily ironic) had had the common politeness to ask her what she wished to do during the morning, when she certainly wouldn't have chosen to walk. As it was, she felt a penance had been imposed upon her—and for what, she wondered?

It was nearly twenty minutes past one when Jessica, having stayed to do no more than wash her hands and run a comb through the tangled ringlets around her face, which was stinging again and in need of a further application of the calamine which the thoughtful maid had still left on her dressing-table, went downstairs.

She took her seat at the lunch-table with a murmured apology and a smile for the children, who were there and showing, Jessica thought, considerably less *verve* than they had displayed in the garden before breakfast, as if they quite

understood that she (and their father?) was in disgrace. And where, thought Jessica, was the wretched governess? Eating her solitary meal in the schoolroom? Or was she off duty for the rest of the day?

The maid came hurrying in to serve the late-comers, evincing no sign whatever of having (if she had) been disturbed at her own meal by the unpunctuality of master and guest, but looking decidedly concerned at the small helpings the latter took of the vegetables handed. For despite the fresh air Jessica was aware that she had very little appetite—a circumstance so unusual as to cause her to wonder whether it was because she was really as tired as she thought, or if she was merely embarrassed by the aura of displeasure and resentment which hovered over the room. It seemed to her that she had been eating for quite a time when her hostess said, in a falsely reasonable tone of voice, “Hugh, if you and Miss Bond wanted to have lunch out why didn’t you say so? It could easily have been packed up for you.”

No, thought Jessica, she *could not* have said that! It wasn’t *possible*. For it was now at least ten minutes since Jessica had taken her seat, and Mr. Hugh was already seated and served when she came in. So that, whatever her hostess had previously said, it was obvious that she must have been sitting there awaiting her guest’s arrival before she made this remark. She was to be insulted equally with her husband. That, Jessica was sure, was true, even if in the finish she had been beating up sufficient courage, hardihood—bad manners—to manage it.

Jessica saw Mr. Hugh look across at his wife with an expression of fury, which before he spoke gave way to another very familiar to her—that of one called upon in the world to deal with all the he and she fools who cluttered it up.

“In mid-January? Don’t be ridiculous,” he said. “I’ve explained the reason why we were late. Lunch could have been kept back for ten minutes without the least trouble to anyone.”

“The maids don’t like extra trouble on Sundays.”

“Rubbish!—and if it were true, they could find other jobs.”

Jessica kept her eyes on her plate, upon which she had replaced her knife and fork. Anger and contempt rose within her like a tide. It was impossible to miss the implication of her hostess's remarks, and it was all she could do to remain silent, so infuriated did she feel. But contempt was a shield and buckler; to answer the insult would be but to put herself on the same level as the woman who had uttered it. Nevertheless, even the small appetite she had brought to the table had gone, and it was a penance to pick up her knife and fork and make an effort to eat the rest of the course.

It was the children who came to her rescue.

"Where did you go?" they inquired.

"Up a steep hill—rather like a young mountain," she told them. "I'm afraid I can't remember its name."

"Stoner Hill," said their father.

"Ooh . . . it must have been *frightfully* cold up there!"

"Yes, very," said Jessica.

"We *never* climb the hangers in winter," said Sue. "Why did you to-day, Daddy?"

"Well, for one thing I wanted our visitor to see the sort of scenery we keep here—she's never been in Hampshire before. And it would have been cold wherever we went—even on the road, when facing the wind. It seemed likely that Stoner, with its woods, might even afford a little shelter."

"But *winter* woods aren't *ever* any good as shelter!" Charles exclaimed. "Golly, it must have been jolly awful! Where did you get lost?"

"We didn't. For some reason, instead of going straight ahead and coming down on to the Alton road, I branched off to the left and so went on climbing for a bit. I suppose if we'd gone on we should have arrived at Froxfield, but luckily we didn't."

"Gosh! you'd have been blown away at Froxfield," Charles told him. "Why, it's the highest village in Hampshire."

"*One* of the highest—let us not exaggerate. And, in any case, we were spared any horrors that might have been in store for us there by not arriving."

A thousand pities, thought Jessica, that he could not oppose

this admirable manner—empty of temper, unperturbed and quietly corrective—to the bad-mannered comments of his wife. But she realised that this was his way of coming back at her; that he was, in fact, saying to the children in a way they clearly appreciated, though innocent of his intention, what he had not said to his wife. And, by the expression on her face, Jessica felt the lady was aware of it. Or was that caused by no more than the mundane fact that the late-comers were keeping herself and the children waiting for the next course?

The cold walk had not, Jessica found, put much of an edge on her appetite and the atmosphere at table had dulled it even more, so she decided that without calling too much attention to herself she might now put down her knife and fork. This she did and at once Mrs. Hugh said, "Ring the bell, Charles," in a tone of voice that might have been ordering the sounding of the last trump.

Charles obliged, and a few minutes later a cold sweet was being handed, of which Jessica took so small a portion that Sue exclaimed, "Your walk hasn't made you very hungry, has it?"

"Wouldn't you say so?"

"You've hardly eaten anything! I only went as far as church and back, but I was *frightfully* hungry."

"So was I," said her brother. "Positively ravenous. And I haven't been out at all. I stayed in to finish a map instead of going to church."

"I'm sure it can't interest Miss Bond to hear what you've been doing with your morning," their mother told them.

"Doesn't it, Miss Bond?" asked Charles.

"Very much," Jessica assured them, but what she was thinking was, Church!—this woman has been to church! Having bundled off her guest for a freezing walk with her husband, without paying her the common courtesy of consulting her wishes in the matter, she now had the impertinence to speak as if it was their own idea and, because they were ten minutes late for lunch, to suggest that they had reasons of their own not alone for going, but for dallying; and that they so much wanted to be alone together that, had Mr. Hugh had

the courage to ask for them, they would have preferred to eat sandwiches out-of-doors on a howling winter day rather than return for lunch!

These reflections made Jessica so angry that she soared away from the dining-table (at which she sat idly disturbing the trifle for which she had no appetite) into some bleak region of silent fury, until Sue's voice brought her back with a jerk to her surroundings.

"Do you go to church on Sunday mornings, Miss Bond, when you're at home?"

"Oh yes," said Jessica, "and sometimes in the evenings too," she added for good measure, which remark for the moment reduced the child to silence, of which her brother took advantage to ask Jessica if she were good at drawing maps. She replied that drawing, she was afraid, was not one of her strong points.

"Oh, it isn't the *drawing*. I mean it would be easy enough if I just had to copy from an atlas. Remembering how the coast-line goes and where the towns come is the hard part. You see," he added confidently, "I'm not very good at geography."

Jessica managed a smile.

"Yes," she agreed, "a knowledge of geography would certainly be a help. Did you manage to finish the map this morning?"

"After a fashion. But it was an easy one—the coast of Spain from the French border to Gibraltar."

Said Mrs. Hugh to the children, "If you have finished your pudding we will excuse you."

They rose, smiled at Jessica and went quietly out of the room, clearly aware that any attempt at dalliance would be cut short. Jessica understood that she would not see them again. And they, she thought, understood it also. Their smiles had a regretful, apologetic air.

Coffee arrived. Jessica drank hers black and very sweet. Nobody spoke.

In after-years, recalling this unpleasant visit, Jessica found it very difficult to remember what happened between this horrid

meal and that served in the evening, except that she spent the afternoon alone in the dining-room, as she had spent the interval between tea and dinner in the drawing-room on the preceding day. The fire, however, had been well made up, though the one comfortable chair in the room, which last night stood at its side, was now moved to command a view of one aspect of the garden—a bleak, uninviting vista which Jessica decided to avoid looking at. And though doubtless her sore face was all the better away from the glow of the fire, she wished someone would come in and suggest moving the chair back to its former position. For, quite apart from its weight, it was a liberty she felt she could not take in this unwelcoming house. Instead she twisted herself round, so that if she lifted her eyes it was not the cold and wind-lashed garden she would see; and since she was alone she curled up her legs so that they did not dangle above the floor. Having thus achieved a degree of comfort, she made an effort to interest herself in the book she had taken up—a recently-published novel by a well-known and widely-reviewed writer.

The only clear recollection she had of the afternoon was that during the first half-hour of her solitude her hostess came into the room, apparently to look for something. She flung a quick glance at her guest and remarked as she went on with the search, "You're as bad as Hugh—he must always curl up in a chair instead of sitting in it like anybody else."

Jessica managed a smile. Rather a stiff one, for it was an effort. She did not uncurl herself, but her voice was equable enough as she explained. The chairs were so very capacious that her feet dangled if she leant back. "And that is not at all comfortable," she said.

"Just Hugh's excuse . . ." her hostess snapped and went out of the room.

Had she *not*, perhaps, come to look for something?—unless it were her husband. Had he, poor wretch, managed to evade her and she had to be sure he was not with her? Whatever the reason, nothing could be more evident than her hostess's determination to ignore any claims to guestship which she might have expected. Clearly, she was not a guest; merely a

'little typist' from his office whom she'd consented to invite for reasons of her own—perhaps, thought Jessica, because he had mentioned her name a little too often. Such rudeness must have *some* basis, and as Jessica could think of nothing in her own behaviour to call it forth, she was driven to looking for it in the most obvious quarter. In some way, Mr. Hugh had contrived to rouse this woman's jealousy. Not because she cared for her husband (nothing was clearer than that the marriage was indeed as Goring and Austen had caused her to suppose), but a good deal went with the marriage and she might, even, be fond of her children, for all she could insult their father in their hearing. It couldn't, surely, be possible that he had allowed her to believe that he . . . that she? . . . The idea was preposterous! There could be nothing in this deplorable exhibition but innate bad manners, snobbery and the determination to make sure of a situation which she apparently considered—so outrageously—a possible threat to the *status quo*.

By the time she had arrived at this deplorable conclusion Jessica was aware that she wanted nothing quite so much as to go home. But apart altogether from the obvious difficulties of getting there, she could not imagine what explanation she could give for her appearance when she arrived a whole twenty-four hours before she was expected. She had said specifically that she would be motored up on the Monday morning in time for lunch at the Chelsea house, and would afterwards go on to the office and be home in the evening at the usual time. She could not possibly announce that she had left the house because of her hostess's insufferable attitude towards her, even if it were a habit of hers to be communicative upon her personal affairs, which her parents well knew it was not; and even if she could have brought herself to put into words the obvious reason for her hostess's behaviour. All of which things, she decided, were probably—no, certainly—a blessing, since they saved her from making a fool of herself.

Nevertheless, as she sat there curled up in her chair, her eyes on the book she was no longer reading, she saw one thing with devastating clarity—she must leave the office. Not that that

would cause her a single pang—far otherwise; but it must be done in good order. She could not just walk out. She had first to find another situation before she could give notice and turn her back on the affairs of Bardell & Son of Freeman's Court for ever. Even so this would not be achieved, she felt, without a few tiresome questions at home, where what Emma thought of as her 'restlessness' over her work (save always that on the *Review*) was a recognised feature in this business of earning a living. But as she had never shown any enthusiasm for the work she did in this legal office, her parents were unlikely to be surprised to hear that she had deserted it. At least they would not have been, but for the intrusion of this personal element. To spend a week-end in your employer's household and then leave his service almost immediately afterwards was the sort of circumstance which her mother would not be likely to miss. However, she was not disposed to worry unduly at the moment over this possibility.

She was not aware that she was considerably over-simplifying the situation; nor had she the faintest idea of the force she was up against or what immediately awaited her. All she wanted was for this week-end visit to come to an end—a telegram summoning her home (on a false alarm) would have been most welcome. And though she could find no complaint over Mr. Hugh's conduct as far as she herself was concerned, she now wished that she had taken seriously that remark of Gerald Harwood's—"The man's in love with you, my poor child!" and even more that she had taken his advice and found a sound excuse for getting out of this visit.

But whatever else she did she had no intention of letting Gerald know he had been right!

It would appear that at some time after she had arrived at these conclusions she had fallen asleep and slept soundly; for although she now saw that the curtains had been drawn and a cup of tea placed at her side, she had heard nothing—that was one of the hiatuses of the afternoon that was never cleared up. The tea, she found, was quite cold; but the fire was blazing brightly and lighting up the room, which she found stuffy, as if

the one window which had let in a moiety of the cold air had been shut when the curtains were drawn. She was sensible of a slight headache and felt much more tired than she had done when she had settled herself after lunch with her book, which, apparently, had been retrieved by the tea-bringer either from her non-resistant hands or from the floor, where it had fallen from them; for it now lay on the small table at her side beside the cup of cold tea. She saw that the time was just on half-past five.

The house was very quiet, and it struck her now for the first time that for her it had had that same quality from the moment of her arrival, though she had not before fitted the impression into an actual thought. There was no coming and going; the sounds of the children's voices came neither on the stairs nor floated out from their quarters upstairs. Servants moved about on the thick carpets silent as mice. They did not approach, they appeared. The sound of animated talk, of laughter, was heard nowhere at all. The house and its occupants gave the impression of existing in a state of suspended animation, as if waiting for something which would bring them all to life. Only in the garden that morning—much too briefly! and for a few minutes at the luncheon table—had the children contradicted this fancy. Deanham Manor House was just that—a house, not a home. That was part, at least, of what was wrong with it. Thank goodness, she would leave it tomorrow morning and never see it again nor need even think of it. This was the first time in all her life, she reflected, that she had felt unhappy.

She picked up the book and carried it with her upstairs to her bedroom, meeting no one on the way, though indeed, so much did she hate the atmosphere of the house, she would not have been very surprised if she had met Quilp. Finding a well-tended fire, drawn curtains, the bed turned down and her night attire and slippers carefully laid out, she thought how delightful it would have been to have accepted the kind of invitation these ministrations connoted. But alas! another meal must be got through and part at least of the evening before she might retire to bed. However, this ordeal by week-end was almost at an end and of what must follow she would not think at the moment.

Sufficient for the day and the immediate hurdle of the evening meal. She had no appetite and no will to conversation. If only they would talk of the war it would be a relief—at least it would introduce a note of normality into things; but in her presence no single comment had been made on any aspect of the conflict since the visit began.

The meal proved to be no livelier than its predecessors, but at least the atmosphere was more normal, even amiable. The talk was small and blessedly impersonal, and even got round, by some route Jessica did not follow, to the novels of Jane Austen, though it did not stay there very long, much to Jessica's regret, for she approved of Jane and all her works and felt safe in a conversation in which she and they figured. But after her *faux pas* over the English medieval manorial system she was wary of expressing an opinion about anything; so when her hostess echoed the not uncommon view that *Mansfield Park* was by far Miss Austen's best book, Jessica let it go at that, though she could think of half-a-dozen sound reasons why she believed the claim could be successfully challenged. And luckily Mr. Hugh, who, she knew, admired Jane, did not, either, try conclusions; so that, on the whole, this meal was by far the pleasantest of any she had sat through since her arrival, though that, indeed, she thought, was not saying very much. Maybe, she decided, her hostess might even be feeling a few qualms about her performance at lunch!

However that might be, her voice still held the same 'Hear and Obey' note when, the meal finished, she announced, "Now, Hugh, take Miss Bond up to the tower. It's your last chance. The wind's dropped and the night's fine and clear." And turning to Jessica she said, "It's well worth climbing the stairs to see the night sky from the roof."

That, at least, was something. Jessica thought. True, she hadn't been asked if she would like to go but at least had been assured that the going was worth while—an inducement lacking over the arrangement for the morning. (The night sky, thought Jessica, might be a pretty toy she kept at the top of the tower for the delectation of visitors.) But once again, she felt, she was being pushed on to Mr. Hugh, as if her hostess was

determined that there should be no misunderstanding as to whose guest she was.

However, she went upstairs and put on her coat and hat, and on reaching the hall found Mr. Hugh awaiting her there, muffled up and be-gloved as he had been in the morning. Together they moved into a part of the house she had not seen before (she had, indeed, seen very little of it, though 'seeing the old house' had been the real—or was it merely the ostensible?—reason for her coming at all!) to arrive at an iron staircase, which twisted sharply upwards and landed them at the top at a door opening on to the flat roof of the tower, in the centre of which was an iron seat. This had a centre back rest, so that you could study the view, above or below, with comfort from either aspect.

They stood together for a few moments at the rail looking along the valley towards Butser and his companions; but after a few minutes Mr. Hugh said, "We may as well sit down and do our viewing in comfort;" and moved away to the seat. But Jessica did not follow. She stood against the rail, gazing out over the wide undulating stretch of open country, which seemed to lie at rest after its long tussle with the wind, beneath the arch of the brilliantly-lighted sky. Seen from the vantage point of the tower, that was awe-inspiring. *I saw Eternity the other night. . . .*

Standing there with her hands resting on the rail, looking up and around, it seemed to Jessica that she was looking right *into* the sky rather than up at it. Of astronomy she was ignorant. She could find in this winter sky no more than the Pole Star, the Plough and Orion; one could hardly miss such a giant, and finding him one found also his dog, Sirius. But that was about all she could manage.

"Worth the climb, would you say?" Mr. Hugh asked.

Not turning her head to look at him and wondering why the iron staircase should be spoken of as if it were Helvellyn, she said, "It's marvellous. It makes me feel very ignorant. I know nothing about astronomy, save that the moon is dead and cold, the stars extremely hot and space freezing."

"And our earth, perhaps, a mere accident?"

Jessica turned round and, still leaning back against the rail, asked, "What kind of accident?"

"I'm afraid I can't tell you that. There are millions of stars in the sky and doubtless there are sometimes collisions. If you look at the night sky long enough it isn't difficult to accept the theory that the earth, like all the other planets, was a fragment thrown off from the sun when a star came too near it."

"So there might be other 'earths' swinging out in space?"

"God forbid!—someone, I think, has called ours the lunatic asylum of the universe. Anyway, conditions on the other planets are said to be such as would make life, as we know it, impossible. I confess I find some comfort in that. We seem, for some reason nobody understands, to have developed conditions which produced life and, at the moment, at least, favour its continuance."

"One must understand physics, surely, to be able to grasp what the astronomers are talking about?" Jessica said. "And at that subject I was a complete duffer at school. But I'd be quite satisfied if I could find my way a little better about the night sky."

They must have been up there for the best part of an hour, when, "You must both be frozen by now!" said Mrs. Bardell's voice from the doorway at the top of the stairs. "We've been cold enough down below, with this door left wide open," and Mrs. Hugh appeared, her fur coat slung round her shoulders and hugged tight across her breast. "It's a lovely night," she added patronisingly, gazing around. "But I think you'd both better come in before you catch a chill."

Cold though it undoubtedly was, with more than a suggestion of frost in the air, there was no wind and Jessica felt that, compared with the walk to which she had been delivered over so cavalierly in the bitter morning weather, this was a spring evening. However, this belated consideration for her comfort was welcome, for despite her interest in the bejewelled sky, and relief in having at last something definite to talk about, she had begun to feel decidedly chilly and to think of the warm bed which awaited her with considerable pleasure.

She walked across to the door and went on down the iron

stairway. Her hostess followed, calling back to her husband, "Be sure to shut the door, Hugh!"

In the hall, she said to Jessica, "We shall have to make a very early start to-morrow morning, so perhaps you'd like to go to bed straight away."

It was the kindest remark her hostess had made to her throughout the week-end, which was probably why it was not until much later that Jessica remembered Mr. Hugh telling Goring that they would not be at the office until after lunch.

CHAPTER SEVEN

IT was not until they were seated at the breakfast-table that Jessica learned that the very early start on the return journey had been made necessary by reason of Mr. Hugh's having to make an appearance in court before midday, which had been somehow overlooked when the arrangement for lunching at Chelsea at one o'clock had been made. In the circumstances, her hostess said, she thought the best plan was for Griffiths to drop her at Chelsea and then take her husband down to the Law Courts and go on to the office with Jessica.

To this Jessica replied that as it was so early she would prefer to be put down in Knightsbridge, and to take the opportunity of executing a small commission—she could get herself to the office in due course quite easily. She was determined not to be driven as far as the Law Courts, or, indeed, anywhere else, alone with her employer. She did not expect any falsely polite objections to be raised by her hostess as to her point of departure, nor were they. We are both, Jessica reflected, heartily glad to see the back of each other, and she herself so unutterably relieved to be spared that luncheon for two at Chelsea which ordinary politeness in a hostess would now have considered obligatory, that she was able for some time to forget that she was stiff with cold.

It was barely eleven when she left the car, with no more than the most formal of leave-takings, and began to walk quickly along Knightsbridge, crossing at Sloane Street into the Park and heading for Oxford Street. The 'commission' was a present for her mother on her approaching birthday, the sudden recollection of which event had provided an excellent reason for leaving that refrigerator of a car and taking to Shanks's pony. The air was intensely cold, and all the signs confirmed the fact that over the week-end the weather had deteriorated steeply and the assault of real winter had now opened, after the prelude of darkness, cold and frost which had been October and November. The unusually mild January, however, had tempted out a few crocuses in the Park, but for the most part they were still sheathed buds, as if, Jessica thought, they knew the worst was yet to come.

She was pleased with herself for having so promptly extricated herself from the plan which was to have delivered her over to Mr. Hugh's company, for though she could not hope to escape his comments upon the week-end, she was in no mood for them at the moment, especially as she felt his observations would centre upon his wife's strange behaviour. Bad enough—but would he have anything to say of his own?

She had another reason for refusing the suggestion of being taken on to the office by Griffiths—she had no intention whatsoever of putting in an appearance there before two o'clock. She was not expected until after the luncheon hour and did not intend, by being there when Goring and Austen arrived, or appearing shortly afterwards, to oblige them by presenting them with more food for thought and comment than they possessed already by the mere fact of knowing her stuck for the week-end in the lioness's den. That that would be their name for it, she had no doubt. For she had not forgotten the looks they'd exchanged and their sly references to the visit which Mrs. Hugh had thrown at her before Austen had entirely got himself out of the room. So now, she was sure, they'd be all agog to know how she had fared. Well, though she knew they were sorry for her, or perhaps because of it, she would not satisfy their curiosity, but Mr. Hugh's gloom,

especially if it had been deepened, as was likely, by the shortcomings of the minions of the law, would tell its own story.

Arrived in Oxford Street, she went into a store and bought herself a warm gay scarf, which she twisted round her neck, crossing the ends beneath her coat in the belated hope of discouraging her incipient chill. And since she had time on her hands she walked on through the store, trying to think of a birthday gift which was at once 'different' and useful. But this impossible effort she soon abandoned, as the gift was for her mother, who would always much rather have something quite ordinary which she really needed, since otherwise she would have to buy it for herself. Nothing just now could be more acceptable, her daughter thought, than a pair of warmly-lined gloves, and the purchase, once decided, was speedily completed.

The warmth of the store and the lack, at so early an hour, of any great press of customers, however, constrained her to remain in it, though there was nothing else she meant to buy. It was very pleasant and safe to stroll about looking at all the things she could not afford and would not buy if she could. "Never look too hard at things you would like to have, or which you need but cannot afford to buy—too devastating!" was Jessica's advice to herself when shopping. For, despite her intelligence and general interest in the affairs of the world in which she lived, she liked good clothes and attractive accessories as much as did Dr. Johnson's 'unidea'd ladies'. She was to be numbered among those who are fine for themselves alone.

This morning her orgy of loitering and looking had very pleasantly dissipated some of the time that must elapse before she could lunch, but there was still considerably more than could be used up by that simple business, and if she arrived at her chosen restaurant too early, there would be a tiresome time-lag at the end of it. So she went on down Oxford Street until she came to a large bookshop, when she went in and feasted her eyes on treasures she could not afford to buy, but justified her roaming around by the purchase of two of her favourite essayists in the excellent cheap editions of the day. Time still to burn, so she walked on to the restaurant, but

aware that she had begun to feel a little tired. Or was she only tired of Oxford Street?

By this time it had long since assumed its usual busy aspect, with a large number of people hurrying to and fro, and others with time on their hands or indecision in their minds, or, maybe, not enough money in their purses, staring into the shop windows. And then, suddenly, Time, for Jessica, ran back, and she remembered that it was up and down Oxford Street that de Quincey had walked with his poor Ann, on a 'wet, sad Sunday' over a hundred years ago. And here, too, so it was said, he had bought his first bottle of laudanum. (What strange odd scraps of fact, she thought, her mind did seem to store up and suddenly throw out at her!) But whatever it had been like in de Quincey's day, it was not a thoroughfare for which Jessica cared very much when it came to walking, and it struck her this morning that most of the hurrying folk looked rather as she felt—exasperated. No longer in need of brisk walking to restore her circulation, she was much tempted to get into a bus and ride the rest of the way to the restaurant, but saw that she was still well ahead of her time-table, so continued to walk.

By the time she arrived she was conscious of the beginnings of a headache, and it belatedly occurred to her that after so early and (as far as she was concerned) so poor a breakfast, and so cold a drive, she would have done better to have used up a little of her time, on leaving the car, by dropping in somewhere for hot coffee and a bun before starting out on this marathon. Incidentally, it would have used up some of the time-lag. However, she hadn't, so all she could do now was to make the best of lunch.

But when her meal was set before her, she found she had lost her appetite somewhere on the last quarter of a mile. Something other than appetite had sat down with her at the table. Its name, perhaps, was Anticlimax. After this extraordinary week-end, so unlike anything she could possibly have imagined, after her damped-down indignation and contempt, this tame returning to the office, as though it had never taken place, seemed singularly lacking in courage—worse, in common sense. She had every reason, she felt, to leave it high and dry,

to send no more than a tersely polite note of resignation. She couldn't believe that it would give Mr. Hugh any surprise whatever. That she decided against it struck her as merely craven, but something seemed to be compelling her to stay and confront the situation—her pride, maybe. Yet she had only to walk out of this restaurant and down into the Tube to Waterloo and catch the next train home to be free of it for ever. The terse, polite note to the office would let her out, but from the explanations which would be necessary at home there would be no escape. In short—and she recognised it—she did not feel equal to coming to grips with so tiresome and, to her, humiliating a situation.

So, her lunch finished, she went on to the office, and having taken a bus arrived only a few minutes after the hour. Austen at the telephone in the outer office broke off his conversation to tell her that Mr. Goring had said he wanted her as soon as she arrived. She found him sitting, as usual, in a cloud of smoke behind his chaotic desk, from which, however, as she knew, he would disgorge any particular document required with the ease of one withdrawing a winkle from its shell.

"Had a pleasant week-end?" he asked her with a grin, after the interchange of 'Good afternoons'.

Jessica hoped her faint smile would be sufficient reply. She could think of nothing to say since she didn't feel in the least inclined to tell even the smallest of social 'fibs' about this visit.

"Comment unnecessary," said Goring at once. "You seem to have caught a cold over it. Don't tell me you were driven there and back in that open car in this weather? Cruelty to children, I call it. Crazy! Bad enough if you've a fur outfit—which you hadn't."

"It would certainly have been more comfortable by train," Jessica agreed. "But the weather had been so mild—it changed overnight."

"The first fortnight in the month was quite misleading—properly unseasonable. You chose the wrong week-end."

She did not say that she had *not* chosen it. She had seen the quick wink he gave Austen as he discarded his dead

cigarette. She sat silent, awaiting the beginning of his dictation.

"Did Mr. Hugh get to court in time?" Goring asked.

She supposed so. They had made a very early start.

"Narrow escape, for neither of us thought to remind him of the change of time."

She didn't think it necessary to say that he must have remembered it at the eleventh hour, and had the morning timetable changed accordingly. Nor was she to be tempted into making any comment upon Deanham or her stay there, but she felt that her reserve was probably as informative as anything she could have said would have been. She was grateful to Goring for not confirming with her the lunch she was supposed to have eaten in Chelsea. He did ask her if she'd seen the children, and added, "Coupla nice kids, those . . . poor little devils," which was a sentiment that found an echo in Jessica's heart.

It was a relief that the post was heavy, and though she had a momentary twinge of conscience over having played truant during the morning, it was no more than that. For now, with plenty to do, her mind would be kept off the thought of the conversation she was sure was impending with Mr. Hugh.

Back in her room, she shut the door and settled down to work, relieved to hear still no signs of his arrival and buoyed up with the hope that he would decide to take the afternoon off. At half-past three, when she took Goring's letters along for signature, this looked even more probable, which comforted her considerably, for the longer the conversation she anticipated was put off, the less likelihood there was, she optimistically told herself, of its taking place at all. But Goring, it was clear, did not share her optimism; indeed, he volunteered the opinion that when he did arrive (he did not say 'if') he'd be in none too good a temper, having had to hang about after the hearing being put forward—a thought, however, which in no wise disturbed Goring. On the contrary, indeed. Considering his affection for his employer, he took, Jessica thought, an odd pleasure in the thought of his discomfiture—maybe because he found Mr. Hugh's expression of it so entertaining. But Jessica had never seen much humour in

these exhibitions, and after her deplorable week-end in his home circle was even less likely to do so.

Finding, when she took Goring's letters along to him, that he had nothing further for her, she went back to her own room, decided that she was in no mood for renewing the drudgery of Costs, and would take this opportunity of writing to her brother, whom she had neglected for some weeks. Back in June, in common with everyone else, he had recorded his age and occupation under the National Registration scheme. The Derby scheme was considered to have worked out unfairly and landed the country in the expense of paying allowances to married men while the young ones, without 'encumbrances', held back, so now compulsion was in the air, and, work of national importance or not, Andy, directly he attained his eighteenth birthday, might very well be called up.

She could not talk to her mother about it, for the only person for whom Emma had a good word at the moment was Sir John Simon, who had recently resigned from the Cabinet on the Conscription issue. Emma could not—or would not—understand that a war of this magnitude could not be fought by the standing armed forces alone; nor was this a burning issue with her merely because she had a son to be drafted. She simply could not come to terms with the business of war, these quarrels of nations in which the young and fit must be involved and sacrificed, and maintained stoutly that if the Governments of the countries concerned had to do the fighting they'd quickly find some other way of settling their difficulties, which, Jessica thought, was highly probable. As for Conscription, this, so far, for Emma had been no more than a word connected with 'those Continentals', who in peace-time actually forced their sons into the Army just when they should be thinking of their careers.

But it wasn't of the war Jessica wrote to her brother. She gave him such news as she had and an account of her week-end—a mocking, amused, bowdlerised version which it did her good to write, and would not worry him as it would her mother if she ever heard about it. Andy wouldn't say, or even think, that people didn't behave like that. He thought 'folk were

queer' and was ready to accept any account of human behaviour, however regrettable, if it came from a trustworthy source, as completely credible.

So, having done her best to convert into a comedy the events which had so angered her over the week-end, she felt considerably better. The letter was slipped into its envelope, stamped and put into her hand-bag for posting on the way home. And then came the unmistakable sounds of Mr. Hugh's arrival. It was now well after half-past four, and if there were letters to be dealt with for the early evening post, they would not leave much time for comments upon and apologies for the week-end. But the bell did not ring and she started work again on the eternal Costs, wishing that she had made her cold, for which Goring would have vouched, an excuse for departing directly his letters had been done. Costs she thought of as a very dull job which paid no dividends—at least, not to her. She was of the opinion that every fifty pages taken down and transcribed on the typewriter should mean a percentage on her salary.

Austen's face appeared round the door.

"Mr. Hugh, please," he said—"all serene!" and hurried off.

Jessica presented herself with the air of one for whom the world stood four-square, which was not in the least how she felt. Mr. Hugh sat, as usual, at the top of his long desk turning over the papers before him. At her entry he looked up and without speaking pulled out for her the chair at the side where she always sat, and waited while she unscrewed her pen. The dictation began, was finished.

"Thank you. Will you bring them in when ready?"

So that was over. Very business-like and calm. Her spirits rose. She sat down and began to type away at top speed.

Austen's sibilant whisper at the door.

"Those got to go to-night? How many?"

"Only four—rather long, though. But no enclosures."

"Do you think you could post them as you go if I gave you the stamps? They'd catch the six o'clock just the same. You could leave me a note of the names for entering up to-morrow. Then I could slide off . . ."

Jessica agreed, but all the same she wished he'd chosen another evening for his engagement. However, when he returned with the stamps he told her that Goring was in Mr. Hugh's room 'having a confab', which made her feel a little better. Austen, as if his conscience troubled him, still hovered. Was she sure there was nothing else she wanted before he went? Nothing, she assured him, wishing he would go and leave her to get on. She wanted to take those letters in to Mr. Hugh while Goring was still with him; that would dish any idea he might be entertaining of referring to the week-end. But above all she was conscious of the fact that she did not want to be left alone with Mr. Hugh.

As she turned the sheet of paper in the machine the telephone began to ring. Let it! Her fingers flew about the keyboard making, it seemed to her, more clatter even than usual, and working at considerable speed she returned the heavy carriage of the machine with so sharp a precision that not until the letter was finished did she realise that the bell was no longer ringing. Either someone had answered the call or the caller had given up.

Well, now she had finished. She covered her machine, picked up the letters and walked along towards Mr. Hugh's room. A glance to the right showed her the wide-thrown door revealing the closed roll-top desk, the bulging waste-paper basket on top of it, indicating that the tenant had vacated it for the day. She supposed—hoped—that he was still in conference with Mr. Hugh, but this, she found, was not so. That gentleman had his room to himself and was standing at the window, apparently lost in thought. Leaving the door ajar, she walked to the table and put down the letters, each with its stamped addressed envelope attached. Mr. Hugh left the window, gave her a quick glance as he sat down at his desk, skimmed through the letters and signed them. Jessica folded them into their envelopes and stood there holding them in her hands.

"I will post them as I go," she said.

"Has Austen gone, then?"

She said he had and then wished she hadn't, for, with a quite different intonation, he said, "It doesn't matter

about the letters. Sit down again—I want to talk to you.”

Jessica remained standing. Glancing at her watch, she saw that it was exactly half-past five.

“I’m afraid I can’t stay—I particularly want to catch my usual train,” she said. Her voice, during the afternoon, had grown progressively hoarser and she had a headache which it was no longer possible to ignore.

“But I can’t let you go without an apology. I’m afraid you had a very unpleasant week-end.”

“Yes,” she agreed, looking not at him but down at the letters in her hands which, to her annoyance, she saw were trembling a little.

“I’m terribly sorry, kiddie. I ought to have known how it would be. I shouldn’t have taken the risk of exposing you to such a situation.”

That idiotic appellation made her angry. She said, “I would rather not talk about it. It’s over and done with, and I should prefer to think it never happened.”

“But *of course* we must talk about it. Come out to dinner with me and we can do it in peace.” His face gathered itself up into the familiar lines of irritation. “Impossible here!”

He looked at his watch and she realised that he had remembered the cleaners were just about due. But all she wanted was to guillotine this conversation at once, not to re-stage it at a table for two, with a shaded light, in a quiet corner of the Rendezvous or some other ‘intimate’ Soho restaurant. She wanted nothing save to walk out of the office at once and never to set foot in it again.

“I’m not hungry,” she said, “and I must go home at once. I have a headache. Please let whatever you have to say wait until tomorrow.”

But as if he saw the desire for flight sitting in her mind, he moved a little nearer to her.

“You must let me explain. My wife is jealous—that explains her bad behaviour. It explains everything that happened over the week-end.”

“Why should your wife be jealous of me? Or do you mean just generally jealous?”

"In this case, of you. But she would be jealous of any woman in whom I showed the slightest interest. You see, we don't get on—we have just nothing whatever to say to each other."

She ignored the explanation.

"Then why did you allow her to press an invitation upon me I'd already refused? Did you urge it upon her?"

"I said you'd been so well brought up you wouldn't accept an invitation from me. The rest I left to her. She wanted to see what you were like, of course; what I 'saw' in you. I'd spoken of you a little."

"Then you must have expected her to behave badly?"

"She surpassed anything I'd expected."

"Without protest from you!"

"To protest would only have been to precipitate a scene. I wanted to spare you that, at least. Much better to let it all fall into silence."

But for Jessica that was not at all where it fell.

"What she said and implied was insulting—as much to you as to me. I'm not used to gratuitous insults, even if you are."

"There can be no answer to such rudeness but silence. The only excuse I can offer for my wife's conduct is her jealousy."

All the indignant sentences which had raged through her mind during and since the close of the week-end, to describe his ignominious part in the role of host, had faded away. She was tired: she could think of nothing but her aching head. Nothing mattered now save that she should be on the other side of the door and out of the building. Mr. Hugh moved again so that he stood between her and her objective.

"I must go home," she said.

"You can't go like this. You haven't even accepted my apology."

"Very well, I accept it."

"But you are still angry."

"Of course I'm angry!" For a moment or so, indeed, her anger conquered her fatigue and put her apprehension to flight. "First your wife's abominable behaviour over the week-end, and now your outrageous explanation. You should be apologising for your *own* behaviour—for inviting me to your

house and then allowing your wife to insult us both. If you didn't mind for yourself, you might have shown a little of your indignation on my behalf *then*, instead of apologising to me now."

"It would have made matters worse, as I've said. Besides, she's right. I *am* in love with you. You must know that!"

"Why should I know it?"

"But you *must* have known from the very beginning. I fell in love with you, I think, the first moment I saw you—in the doorway of this room . . . the way you held your head . . . the way you walked . . . smiled. I should have engaged you even if you couldn't have read back a single word of the shorthand test I gave you."

She did not return the smile he gave her. She was not flattered. This was the male at his silliest.

"I must go home," she said again. "Please let me pass."

"Listen to me. My marriage means nothing to me. Come away with me, kiddie! We could be happy together, I'm sure of that. My wife can have Deanham and all the other things she values. I've an ample income. We could live comfortably enough—in the country, on the coast, if you like—Devon, Cornwall. My wife won't care, as long as she finds herself left in possession. Her jealousy isn't because of me, it's only because she's always afraid I'll find an excuse for selling up everything and leaving her to live on alimony elsewhere. She likes being well-off, having a town and country house, and acting Lady of the Manor. It was never worth while, even before I met you. And now it doesn't matter one iota."

She looked at him as if she saw him for the first time.

"You must be mad!" she told him.

"You can't pretend you didn't know how much you attracted me. Surely I made that clear from the beginning? I felt sure you liked me too."

Jessica was stunned into silence—and into sudden horrible awareness. This, then, was the explanation of the unease which had stirred in her from the first in his company, the thing which Goring and Austen had known!

"Kiddie!—you *must* have known!"

That silly appellation again!

"This is utterly ridiculous!" she said. "Why, we hardly know each other!"

"I know enough about you to know that we could be happy together!"

"You have no right to speak for me. You don't know anything about me. All this is something you've just worked up—I can't imagine why."

To her horror she saw that he was completely unconvinced. Surely no one had ever built such a farrago of nonsense out of so little!—no more than a shared interest in books, an occasional interchange of opinion upon some particular writer. And always at his instigation, never hers.

"We can't talk here. Come out to dinner with me. Then we can talk without interruption."

"There's nothing to talk about. Please move away from the door."

By way of reply he stretched his arms across it. As she tried to break through he caught and held her by the shoulders, pushing her back against the wall, and she was driven to avoiding his kisses by an undignified struggle to free herself. Suddenly his grasp slipped from her shoulders to her hands. Thus pinioned, her only means of defence was to move her face first to one side, then to the other. As this only made him laugh she had just decided she must kick his shins, when at that very moment a diversion occurred. A piece of paper rolled tightly up into a ball came hurtling through the long window which was open a few inches at the top. It struck the door above Mr. Hugh's head and brought him sharply back to reality. The windows of the offices on the other side of the Court raked those of Bardell & Son, and the little scene being enacted in Mr. Hugh's room obviously had an interested audience. Members of the staff? Or perhaps the cleaners? Jessica was grateful to them, whoever they were, for Mr. Hugh, startled and indignant, came away from the door to pick up the paper ball and hurl it back through the open top of his own window. That was Jessica's moment. She opened the door, fled along to her own room, seized her coat and hat and belongings and

dashed out. Just as she reached the door at the top of the stairs it opened upon her and she found the anticipated cleaners barring the way.

"Sorry . . . I'm very late . . . I shall miss my train. So sorry . . ." she exclaimed and was down the stairs, through the open door and running down the Court before they had recovered sufficiently to point out that they also were on the earth.

Jessica had walked to the Bank and was awaiting the noisy little train which would carry her to Waterloo when she realised that she still held the four letters in her hand. They could be posted at that station and if they were late she'd never know or care; for she had seen the last of Hugh Bardell and his office. Whatever explanations she had to make at home, she was quite certain about that.

On her way thither, calmly and collectedly, she planned what she would do. She would leave the house at the usual time each morning, buy a *Telegraph* on the way and answer such advertisements as seemed suitable in the Reading Room of the British Museum. Her Reader's ticket was still in force, for she had continued to have it renewed each quarter since it was first granted. At the same time, she would write a formal note to 'Messrs. Bardell & Son' resigning her position. For the rest, here was an opportunity to do some reading. She would select her seat, put in the slips for the books she wanted directly she arrived, and then go out to post her letters while they were being collected for her. That she would fail to secure another job before the week was out she couldn't believe. She would then calmly announce the change at home and no awkward questions would be asked. If it should seem to her parents a little odd that having spent a week-end at her employer's country house in the bosom of his family she should almost at once take another situation, well, that was a hurdle for another day.

Upon her reaching home with all the signs of a severe cold about her, Emma exclaimed in dismay, but maintained that she was not in the least surprised. She had worried all the week-

end, she said, at the thought of her going away in such weather by road, and the car one of those draughty contraptions, too, she had no doubt, with 'side pieces or whatever they call them' (Jessica did not tell her that it was worse even than that!), and tramping miles, too, probably, in Sunday's icy blasts. When you went into the country to stay, you were always expected for some reason to walk about in it. "Not that you," she told Jessica, "ever need much encouragement to go walking, weather or no weather. You should have worn your thick everyday coat instead of that new one—not fit for such weather! I wonder you haven't caught your death! And you don't look to me as if you enjoyed yourself very much, either."

Jessica said the weather had changed too suddenly, but admitted she was tired, had a headache and the beginnings of a cold. She thought she'd go to bed after supper.

"Supper *in bed!*" said Emma. "Go along up at once. I'll bring you a hot-water bottle."

For once Jessica did not argue. Bed was exactly what she wanted—a refuge, an escape from the chat which would be expected of her by her father and sister, though not by Emma, who always knew when you might as well try to climb Mount Everest as attempt to lure Jessica into conversation.

In bed she drank her soup and ate a buttered egg with better appetite than she had expected, and with a comforting sense of having satisfactorily arranged to deal with her embarrassing situation. But above all she was conscious of her pleasure and contentment at being home again. Deanham Manor might be a good many things, but certainly not a home. It harboured neither warmth nor human affection. It even amused her now to think that she despised it as much as, even more than, Mrs. Hugh (what her Christian name was she never learned) would despise Number Six, Thelma Road, if you could imagine her becoming acquainted with it.

Her optimism was a little shattered in the morning when she awoke to find that her cold had settled firmly upon her chest and that her little cough of yesterday had become painful. "No office for you to-day," decreed Emma, and a half-degree rise in temperature underlined this decision. She was to stop in

bed and if she wasn't better on the morrow Emma would get Dr. Hamilton down. Much to her surprise, Jessica accepted this ruling, but said that Ethie must go and telephone the office. These things settled, she gave up attempting to straighten out the situation. Fate had taken things out of her hands for the moment; but she intended, directly she was up again, to follow out the programme she had set herself. Meantime, she would forget about it. Already it seemed remote and unreal.

Ethie reported that she had spoken to someone at the office who had said he would give the message to Mr. Whoever-it-was when he arrived, and that he was sorry and hoped she'd soon be better. He sounded ever so nice—quite concerned. It was ever so cold out—cold enough for snow. Later in the morning she took up a letter which had arrived, she remarked unnecessarily, by the second post.

"It's got the Richmond postmark on it," she added, "so I expect it's from that Mr. Harwood you go out with."

This remark, which at any other time would have annoyed Jessica considerably, now definitely relieved her mind. For one awful moment she had thought that it might be from Mr. Hugh.

She took the letter and, with only the merest glance at it, put it down on the bedside table. A letter from Gerald Harwood could wait. He'd only be wanting to know how she had enjoyed her week-end in the lap of luxury—and of winter!

Ethie did not immediately take herself off. She was at a loose end, these days, finding herself shut out from the excitements of the Women's Services, all of which, so far, had rejected her proffered services. The millinery had gone back on her, too. Not that she cared about that, and even as to the Services she didn't entirely despair—now that there was all this talk of Conscription, anything could happen. The Women's Services—or one of them—might be glad to get her before long. Standing by the fire and holding out to the warmth first one foot and then another, she remarked, "I can't think why *you* don't go into one of the Services, Jess. Of course I know you've got funny ideas about the war, but if I could do the things you can, I'm sure they'd have me like a shot, even if I'm

not A.1. medically. After all, they take men for the Army who pass B. and C."

Jessica, who privately thought it a great pity that one of the Services hadn't long ago accepted her sister, if only for the reason that she wouldn't then be making a nuisance of herself at this moment, didn't pursue the subject, and was relieved when Emma came in and said, "Now, Ethie, don't stay up here talking. I want Jess to get a little sleep. People with a temperature need to be kept quiet. Come along now."

Left alone, Jessica opened and read Gerald Harwood's letter. It said:

DEAR JESSICA—Sorry I missed you this afternoon. I telephoned at twenty-two minutes past five and was told you had left. Thought I might catch up with you at Waterloo, but no! Trust you had a pleasant week-end, despite the cold. If the weather improves perhaps we could meet on Saturday next for a walk, when you can tell me how the rich live. I'll give you a ring later in the week.

As ever, Yours, GERALD.

I telephoned you this afternoon at twenty-two minutes past five.

There could be no mistake about that. If Gerald said it was that time when he had telephoned her, then it was. All the same, when she had taken the letters in to Mr. Hugh to sign it had been exactly half-past five, and she remembered she had heard the telephone bell ringing just before she had finished them. Austen had left and Goring too, apparently, so it must have been Mr. Hugh who had answered. She hadn't heard Goring go, but if he had taken the call he could certainly not have said she had gone, since he would have been half-deafened by the sound of her typewriter at his back, and would have opened the door and said, with one of his knowing smiles, "Mr. Harwood on the telephone, Miss Bond." *It could, therefore, only have been Mr. Hugh.* He didn't mean, her to arrange to meet Gerald Harwood or anyone else that evening.

She was so angry about this that her temperature seemed to

have jumped several degrees.' Then, as quickly as it had assailed her, her anger melted. There was nothing she could do about it now, or, perhaps, ever. She'd never see Mr. Hugh again. Already that stupid page in her life, she told herself, had been torn out. She did not know, as yet, that pages in the book of life can't be torn out; they can be turned over and sometimes forgotten, but no more. There is, however, no reason why you should re-read them.

After her comfortless week-end in all that upper-middle-class grandeur, with Acrimony in charge, that modest room with its glowing fire and her warm bed was Paradise. Turning her face into the pillow, she slept.

When Emma brought up a breakfast tray in the morning, she said she had had a good night and felt better. But that was before she turned over the two letters for her on the tray and saw on the thick blue foolscap envelope of one of them the appalling handwriting of Mr. Hugh. She had the sense, however, to leave it unopened until she had drunk a cup of tea and swallowed the porridge Emma had told her she wanted 'all eaten up'.

The other letter was from her Aunt Kate, who included among the general family news the fact that she was going to have a baby in the summer. "And believe it or not, and farm or no farm, everyone here wants a girl! Your grandfather says that as a family they've 'properly neglected' our sex and that he expects Tom and me to do something about it!" Everything on the farm was as usual. The weather during January had been very warm, but the delayed winter, everyone thought, was now well on the way—it had suddenly become very cold. Andy sent his love and was looking forward to another letter and so indeed were they all. Well, that, too, was on the way. Luckily she had remembered to post it at Waterloo with the others.

The sanity and normality of this letter quietened the commotion the sight of that spidery handwriting on the envelope of the other had aroused in her. Perhaps she needn't read the letter—perhaps it was merely a formal acknowledgment of the

telephone message concerning her absence. But something kept tapping at the door of her mind, pushing it open and hissing, "But *why*? The correct verbal response was sent to that, there can be nothing to add to it." A letter, certainly, was superfluous. She would like to tear it up unread and commit it to the flames when the fire was re-lighted. But she decided against this way out. She must know what she was up against, and would therefore read it, or try to—and she reached for the thick blue foolscap envelope and ran the knife on her tray beneath the flap.

As she drew out the letter she saw at a glance that there was a great deal of it and that the handwriting was more hopeless even than usual. Her heart sank; again the desire to destroy it unread assailed her; but she set herself to deciphering the script, which, naturally appalling, had not been improved by the urgency with which, only too obviously, it had been written. There were words, phrases, whole sentences which refused to yield up their meaning from the hieroglyphics which shrouded them; others which, when they did, either angered or mortified her. For the one thing which did emerge clearly from the letter was the writer's belief that she shared, at least to some extent, in what he called this 'upwelling sympathy' between them. And for this there was no warrant whatsoever except that occasionally—*occasionally!*—they happened to be enthusiastic about the same writer, the same book. For the rest, he had never advanced an inch but that she had retreated a foot. Never once had she ever felt at ease in his company or conversation—and here, she saw now, was the reason. She was not 'attracted' to him in the least; nor did she believe that the attraction she had for him added up to very much. All the necessary ingredients to such a situation were there—a marriage in which neither partner spoke the same language and from which both attraction and affection had long since taken wing, and a meeting with a young woman who, knowing nothing of all this, had presented, by virtue of her youth, inexperience and ingenuousness, an element of attraction and companionableness which the marriage lacked. But love? . . . passion? To these, untouched, she knew herself a stranger.

She was 'in love' with no one. In that sense love was a meaningless word. Moreover, she was shocked to think that any man should look to her to help him break a relationship which brought him nothing but unhappiness and animosity. If my marriage was as unhappy as all that, she told herself, with all the certitude of inexperience, I would break away on my own account, not persuade myself that it was because I'd fallen in love with someone else, which would be no reason at all for me! She wouldn't have turned a hair if Mr. Hugh had told her he was leaving his wife; indeed, it would have seemed to her a very sensible thing to do. But to expect her to adjust the balance, even to persuade himself that she would be willing to do it, was too much.

She did not stop to think that perhaps he did not realise how little she was concerned in this business of love and marriage, how uninterested, from this angle, she was in his sex. And indeed, young as she was—some seven months yet to her twenty-second birthday—he certainly would not have believed such a thing. Yet it was true. As true as when Emma, sponsoring her daughter's desire, at sixteen, to travel to and from the City each day, had declared that she had her mind on other things than men and marriage. Eighteen months of war, which for so many had already given to sex so outrageous an importance in life, had done nothing to alter Jessica's sublime indifference to it.

Revolving now what she thought of as a stupid and most annoying situation, she tore the letter into fragments, put them into the tiresomely noticeable envelope and placed it, with Kate Bond's letter, beneath her pillow. When the fire was going and she had the room to herself she would consign it to the flames. That an answer would be expected did not occur to her, any more than did the idea of writing one. She had made herself plain yesterday on the matter, and she thought that any man who could persist in the face of that must expect to be ignored. If he had thought to rush her off her feet he would find that he had only succeeded in making her take to her heels.

Coming in presently to put Jessica's tray outside and to

re-light the fire, Emma remembered that she had omitted to take her temperature before she had her breakfast. Unnecessary, Jessica said; she was sure it had gone back to normal. Emma was not so sanguine. She thought she looked flushed and strung-up. But Jessica countered by giving her the news from the farm and passing over Kate's letter. "And this is for the flames," she was driven into saying, since in extracting this epistle she had withdrawn and scattered the torn-up fragments of Mr. Hugh's.

Without comment Emma put the pieces on the fire.

"When the room's warm you can get out of bed and sit by the fire while I re-make your bed," she said, and was surprised that Jessica did not launch a protest against another day in retirement. And relieved that she did not say anything about a speedy return to the office, which she had expected. The weather had worsened; snow and a sharp frost had arrived overnight, and the morning paper, according to Ethie, who had purloined it in her sister's absence, did not promise an improvement. Finding, a little later, that the patient's temperature had risen another half-degree, Emma was relieved rather than worried, for even Jessica, in this weather, with a rise in temperature, however slight, would know that any thought of leaving the house was out of the question. For once, indeed, Jessica seemed content to remain in bed; admitted that her chest was 'sore' and did not deny that she had a cough. But she would not agree that this state of affairs meant that she should 'lie down and keep warm', as her mother insisted. On the contrary, she argued, since the room was so warm, there was no reason at all why she shouldn't read in bed. So the morning paper and the books she asked for were placed by her bedside, her pillows adjusted, her bed-jacket fastened across her chest, and Emma withdrew. It was something, at least, she told herself again, that Jessica had made no fuss about remaining in bed; not even when, the next morning, her temperature proved to be practically normal again. During the afternoon and early evening she sat by the fire and seemed so much better that Emma fully expected to have to argue against an immediate return to the office. She meant to prevent that for the rest of

the week, if she could, unless the weather radically improved, which certainly it showed no sign of doing.

On the following morning, indeed, it was clear that winter, in the least compromising of moods, was upon them. Snow had fallen in the night and from the heavily canopied sky it began, in the morning, to fall again, blown hither and thither by a strong, gusty wind. Jessica greeted it as an ally, for it supplied a first-class reason why she should not put in an appearance at the office without her having to make an immediate effort to write her resignation, which would, she now felt, after the letter of yesterday morning, bring down more trouble upon her head than she had anticipated. Resign she must and would, but this breathing-space was more welcome at the moment than would have been the flowers of spring. She meant to write over the week-end, and on Monday to betake herself, as she had decided, to the Museum, there to work out her plan, leaving her parents to assume all was as before until she told them otherwise.

The sight, then, the next morning, of another of the long blue envelopes on her breakfast tray seemed like a menace, and when she opened it and ran her eye hopelessly down the crabbed hieroglyphics, she realised from the phrases she was able to detach from the puzzle that it was something even more unpleasing and embarrassing than its predecessor. For here he had repeated and repeated what he had already said and written. Nothing she had said that afternoon in the office, nothing she had opposed to his attitude and behaviour, had had the least effect. What he now wrote was a declaration of love—passion? (she didn't know the word!)—and an exhortation to her 'to have courage'. For what? For defying the conventions, for outraging the standards to which she had been brought up? It went on and on. And always that reiteration of happiness for them both 'once the leap had been taken . . .' No, she said, tearing the letter across and across, this is too much. Her breathing-space was gone and with it her careful little scheme for saving her mother the kind of worry to which she was only too prone. Mr. Hugh should get her letter of resignation to-morrow morning, and surely that would be an end of the

fantastic situation? She did not know how she could say more explicitly what she had already said; but the fact that she did not intend to return to the office should surely be conclusive? And what, she interrupted herself, did it matter whether it was or not? This was the twentieth century. He could not follow and knock her over the head. If he bombarded her with letters they would go on the fire. All she had to do was to write this letter now, announcing her intention of not coming back. Easy enough. Announcing the same fact at home was also easy enough; vouchsafing a reason, as she would be expected to do, less so, since it went much against the grain to recite the facts. It made her feel very young and *gauche* to reflect that she had not understood the situation, as Goring and Austen, she must now believe, most certainly had from the first, and had watched it with the keenest interest. And thinking *what* about her?

This letter of Mr. Hugh's, in short, so incensed her that she made a poor breakfast and convinced Emma, despite her denials, that she did not feel so well. She inquired if anyone was going out during the morning, and said that if so she would have a letter for the post, and presently sat down at her desk and wrote a six-line letter to Mr. Hugh. In view of all the circumstances, it said, she had decided not to return to the office. She hoped he would take this decision as final and that he would not write to her again. It was a heartless, utterly detached little note, that made no attempt to soften the blow, with no hint of friendliness or of that quality described as being cruel to be kind. She didn't feel friendly or kind, or compassionate. All she wanted was to free herself from an impossible situation which had come about, she was sure, through no fault of her own, but which made her feel cheap and rocked the foundations of her tranquil existence. And having written it and sealed it away in its envelope, she left it to be taken to the post when either Ethie or her mother should be going out. *Hugh Bardell, Esq., Messrs. Bardell & Son, Freeman's Court, High Holborn, London, W.C.1.* She hoped it was the last time she would need either to write or to see those words.

When Ethie put her head in the door and asked, "Anything

to post?" she was sensible of relief. Ethie might smirk and be in some odd fashion amused; but she wouldn't worry, as her mother, she was sure, had been doing, guessing the origin of those distinctive envelopes and by no means unaware of the vexation they aroused in her daughter. Only after her sister had taken the letter and the front door had closed behind her did it occur to Jessica that she should have delayed the letter until the morrow, which, since the office was closed on Saturdays, would have ensured that there should be no letter over the week-end—nothing, indeed, until the Tuesday. However, it was too late now, and the announcement of her decision to leave the office was all the better, she thought, for having been written immediately upon the reading of this morning's letter. There was nothing to do now but to await events, and to hope that Mr. Hugh had realised his blunder and decided to retire with what dignity he could muster.

The next morning brought her a letter from Gerald Harwood which said, "Not having heard from you regarding my suggestion of a walk on Saturday afternoon, I telephoned the office during the day and was told—by the office boy, I think, at least the person who usually answers the phone to me—that you were away with a bad cold. I offer my commiserations and hope you are now well on the road to recovery. The weather would have washed out the walk, anyway, and is not expected, according to the Weather Men, to improve yet awhile. So at the moment, provided you're not suffering unduly, you are in the best place. As ever, Gerald."

This common-sense note raised her spirits considerably, which Emma noted with satisfaction. By the evening post, however, came another of the now too-familiar blue foolscap envelopes, which Jessica did not open until the household was in bed and asleep. Then, quietly getting out of bed and turning down the electric light switch, she sat by the dying fire and read what Mr. Hugh had written. It horrified and shocked her; but something level-headed and protestant within her refused the picture presented to her. People did not commit suicide for so little, and those who threatened it did not perform. This was a threat which she would not allow to alarm

her. It was as silly and meaningless as everything else in this stupid business.

Nevertheless, she spent a restless night; in the morning her temperature had risen half a degree, and she seemed to her mother to be making hard going of this throwing off of a bad chill, which was not what usually happened with Jessica. That something was worrying her Emma felt sure, but she knew she would not speak of it. That it had something to do with the letters which arrived in those long blue envelopes, addressed in such a nervous, difficult-to-read handwriting, she was also sure, but Jessica, though she had torn up the first one, had read and answered the other; and it was, presumably, the reply to this which had arrived by the last post. Against these worrying items there had been a letter this morning (according to Ethie's assertion) from this Mr. Harwood, with whom Jessica had gone walking in the late summer and with whom she had often had tea or an evening meal after office hours. Emma, however, continued to be worried.

After lunch on Sunday she and Sid went into Jessica's room—Sid ostensibly to see 'how the coal situation was', Emma because she considered her patient had made a poor midday meal.

"If you're not better on Monday," she said to Jessica, "I shall get Dr. Hamilton down. This cold should have cleared up after nearly six days in bed. I think you must be thoroughly run down. It's not like you to take so long to pick up." To which Jessica said indifferently, "Oh, I'm all right, Mother—don't fuss!" and Ethie, who had added herself to the company, commented, "Pity you didn't get your chill a week ago, Jess. Drury Hamilton was home for a few days and I daresay if he'd known it was *you* wanting the doctor he'd have been down like a shot. Should think he's gone again by now. You don't seem to be very lucky, do you?"

To which Jessica said sharply that she wasn't in need of a doctor and ignored the reference to Drury. She was aware, however, that she did not feel up to spending days in the British Museum Reading Room, so that the only thing there remained to do was to announce to her mother that she did not intend to

return to the office. But she did not say why, nor indeed advance any sort of excuse or explanation. Directly she had got rid of her cold she meant to find another job and asked that the *Telegraph* might be ordered for her, to which Emma said sharply that whatever advertisements she answered she wouldn't leave the house to keep any appointment until she had got rid of her cold. It was her father who asked why all of a sudden she wanted to leave 'Bardell's'.

"I've several reasons. . . . And it's not so sudden," Jessica told him. "I've been thinking about it for some time," which was an exaggeration, in fact, though indeed it did seem to be an idea which had lived in her mind for a very considerable while.

"But after going away to your boss's country house!" objected her father, to which she replied that she couldn't see what that had to do with it—invitations were often very difficult to evade. "I had no desire to go," she added.

"And you didn't enjoy it very much, either," commented Emma. "Oh, I know you haven't said so, but you won't deny it, I'm sure."

"It wasn't weather for the country or for getting there in an open car," Jessica unnecessarily informed them.

"But I thought you liked the office," Emma rather pointlessly remarked. She was sensible that something was wrong somewhere but couldn't put her finger on it. There was, she remembered, that little affair of the fur hat. More behind that, she'd always felt, than Jess had allowed anyone to know. She didn't like it. She didn't like it a bit. Not because she didn't trust Jess, but because Emma still saw dragons in the path where a girl as attractive as Jess was concerned, when it came to earning a living. Her earlier situations had never worried her (only the risk of getting to and from them), for she was not the only girl employed in any of them, and these loose morals which the war had brought about were not, she fancied, found only among young women who had gone away from home to some form of war work.

"No, I've never liked the work I did there," Jessica said, thinking of it, and so phrasing it, as already in the past tense.

"And you've quite made up your mind to leave?"

"I *have* left—I wrote on Thursday to say I shouldn't be returning."

"Well, that's settled, then," Emma said. "Now forget all about it and get well. There are plenty of other situations. No sense in stopping where you are unhappy."

It was clear that Emma wouldn't ask questions—as clear as that she didn't believe that mere dislike of the work she did had moved Jessica to resign. And at the back of her mind there remained the thought of those distinctive envelopes which had arrived almost every morning that week, the first of which, containing the torn-up letter, Jessica had told her to put in the fire.

It was later in the day that Sid said suddenly to Emma "What's wrong with our girl, Em?"

Emma did not thank him for echoing a question she had already put to herself and answered so unsatisfactorily.

"I don't know," she said. "And I don't suppose she'll ever tell me. But I think, whatever it is, she has settled it for herself."

"By leaving the office, you mean? Where does that take us?"

"Just as far, I think, as Jess wishes us to go."

"Someone there making up to her. That it?"

"I don't know, Sid. Men, sometimes, you know, can be very tiresome."

"If they fancy a girl, you mean?"

"If *she* doesn't fancy *them* . . ."

"There aren't many men at that office. Only two, in fact, and the office boy, or whoever he is."

Emma saw precisely where that remark landed them, but did not intend to follow it up. She said, "Well, the child's done the sensible thing, as we might have known she would."

"You don't think there was any trouble over the weekend?"

Emma didn't. Not *trouble*. But she didn't think Jess had enjoyed the visit very much. She hadn't, she thought, from the first wanted to go. They must have been mad to let her drive

down in an open car—nearly sixty miles—dressed as *she*' was, on such a bitter day. Glad to have got the subject away from the uncomfortable corner into which Sid's question had pushed it, she endeavoured to keep it there. Whatever the situation was or had been, Jessica, she knew, would never, of her own accord, speak of it. Emma decided to give her all possible help by accepting the situation, whatever it was, as Jessica, with sound sense, had resolved it.

"Say no more about it," she counselled Sid. "I'm sure, whatever it is, or was, it's no fault of Jess's if this Mr. Hugh's really mixed up in it. Let's ignore the whole thing. I'm sure that's what she wants."

It was indeed, but the stage when that was possible had not yet been reached. For on Tuesday morning a letter from Gerald Harwood arrived which Emma put on to Jessica's breakfast tray with a sense of relief. And with the same sense Jessica opened the envelope. She saw at a glance that it was brief. It said:

DEAR JESSICA—I rang you at the office yesterday (Monday) to find out if you were back in harness. The usual voice (of the young man you call Austen, I believe) said you were not, and almost at once he was displaced by someone else who asked who I was and, being told, said, very fiercely, you had given notice that you would not be returning, and that he supposed he could put that decision down to my interference! I said he most certainly could not, but that if I might judge from his tone I should now feel justified in interfering and that in resigning I could not but feel you had acted very sensibly. If this man is being a nuisance to you, please tell me . . . and let me deal with him. Hope you are improving. GERALD.

By the evening post arrived another letter from Mr. Hugh, angry and beseeching by turns, and asserting that it was only the influence of 'this Mr. Harwood' which had brought about her resignation. Clearly he was in love with her, though she had assured him that they were merely 'friends'. He sounded a

complete 'outsider'. Would she not *please* agree to come back to the office when she was well? He promised to behave and not to bother her any more. "But don't go out of my life . . . you are the only person in it I care a brass button for . . . I can't go on if I'm never to see you again . . ." and so on and so on.

She tore this epistle up and consigned it to the fire. Gerald's letter she did not answer. It was idiotic of Mr. Hugh to credit him with her decision and, for some reason she did not fathom, it annoyed her intensely that Gerald should have offered to deliver her from his embarrassing and unwanted attentions. She wished there were no men in the world.

Emma meanwhile continued to be more worried about Jessica's stubborn cough than about anything else—even the possibility of a continuance of the tiresome letters. "If any more come, put them in the fire," were Jessica's instructions, and she decided that either Mr. Hugh had given up or Emma had obeyed her instructions. Neither mentioned the matter.

Jessica's temperature went down, and she rejoined the family circle, fretting that her mother refused for the present to allow her to go out since the weather had not relented. True, few advertisements had appeared in the advertisement columns which much attracted her, and this was an added tribulation, even though she knew Emma would frown upon the idea of a journey to town for interviews. It was, however, a relief to have no more letters from the two men who had troubled the quiet waters of her life—the first by his unwanted and embarrassing overtures of 'love', the second by his ridiculous suggestion that he should weigh in as her deliverer. She could look after herself, thank you very much. It gave her considerable satisfaction to think of Gerald Harwood looking the last two days for a letter from her and getting none. This, she thought, was the end of that friendship. It gave her a sense of deliverance she found very satisfying.

In the early evening of the third day, she had wandered away from the family circle round the dining-room fire to the front sitting-room, ostensibly to collect a book; and moving to the

window she stood there, throwing an indifferent glance down the empty road, wishing that she could transport herself, *pro tem.*, to the other end of the world, or, like Huckleberry Finn, 'die temporarily' until everything had settled down again to the norm, and oblivion blotted out this humiliating chapter in her life.

These not very profitable wishes were interrupted by her sudden realisation that in this fireless room she was very cold; and she went upstairs to collect a house coat. Back again at the window, and thinking how much more sensible it would be to go back to the room where the fire was, her attention was riveted by the sight of a tall man with his overcoat collar turned up, standing at the corner of the road which turned off to the left just below the short group of houses of which Number Six formed part. He stood there looking first one way and then the other, obviously wondering how the numbers ran and whether to cross over and go down the road or to come straight on. It *could* not be, she told herself—he wouldn't have the impudence. But she knew there was no doubt—she would know that flat-footed, self-conscious walk anywhere—and, knowing, felt herself engulfed by a fury colder than the room. Moving back from the window she watched his oncoming. Twelve, ten, eight, and here he was, unfastening and pushing back the gate of Number Six, turning to fasten it tidily after him and walking on up to the front door. Before the knocker could descend or the bell be rung, she was out of the room and at the door.

Flinging it open, "What have *you* come here for," she demanded, "uninvited?"

"It's high time I came, I think," said Gerald Harwood, stepping inside and not forgetting to remove his hat.

"You take too much on yourself," she told him, shutting the door behind him. "There's nothing for you to do here. Nothing."

"That remains to be seen."

Without another word she withdrew the evening paper from the letter-box and turning her back on him went back into the front room, trembling not with cold any longer but rage. She heard him go along to the dining-room, heard a murmur of

voices, the shutting of the door behind him. She drew the blinds, turned on the light, and sat down with the evening paper—nobody would come seeking that, at the moment. Even the fury of Verdun would wait this evening upon these revelations, whatever they were, which Gerald Harwood had come to relate. Presently there floated in to her from the adjacent kitchen the sound of china being moved about, the slight squeak of the trolley's wheels as they travelled from kitchen to dining-room. Mr. Harwood, who had clearly come straight on from the office, was being offered refreshment.

She was cold and longed to go to bed, but she did not intend to emerge from cold storage until Gerald Harwood had departed. Whole centuries seemed to pass before there was any sign of this event. But at last the dining-room door opened, she heard her father's voice as he came along to speed the unexpected guest, then the door of the room she sat in was boldly opened and Mr. Harwood's head appeared.

"Good night, Jessica," he said.

"Good night," she said coldly, without moving.

The front door opened and shut. The gate clicked. Steps went on down the road. The steps of the uninvited, interfering Gerald Harwood, whom she could cheerfully have murdered.

The door of the room in which she sat boiling with rage and freezing to death, opened again—only an inch or so this time—and her father's voice said, "You must be cold in here, my girl."

"I am," said Jessica.

"Better come into the warm and have some supper."

"I don't want any supper. I'm going to bed," said Jessica.

And went.

Five minutes later Emma came up with a hot-water bottle and a cup of Bovril.

"I hope you haven't caught another cold, Jess," she said. "Drink this at once and get into bed quickly."

Not a word about the visitor and his mission, for which Jessica almost came out of her sulks to thank her.

It was Ethie next morning who pronounced the verdict on Gerald Harwood.

“What a lovely fella, Jess! . . .”

Less exuberantly expressed, it seemed also to be Sid and Emma’s verdict.

CHAPTER EIGHT

LOOKING back a few years later upon this period of her life Jessica wondered how it was that it should have taken the shape it had.

For weeks after Gerald Harwood’s visit on that cold February night in nineteen-sixteen she had never wanted or intended to see him again. He was the first of her several male acquaintances to come to her home and it was never her intention, any more than with the others, to invite him. That he had taken it upon himself to present himself unasked, in the guise, as seen by her parents, of the protector of the young and ignorant, set her most firmly against him. But when she discovered that he had asked her mother to send on to him any further letters (so easily to be recognised) from Mr. Bardell, and that this had been done, there were no words too strong in which to clothe her feeling against him. She was angry, too, with her mother, whom she accused of interference and disloyalty, much to her distress. Mr. Harwood, Jessica told her, had no standing at all in the matter; he was just a busy-body. He had no right whatever to read letters addressed to her, much less to answer them. He had taken altogether too much upon himself. She felt, indeed, deeply humiliated whenever she thought of this conspiracy, the more so because she had never doubted that when the letters ceased to arrive a fool had been put in his place by her own firmness and plain speaking. To know them intercepted and answered by a young man who was no more than a mere acquaintance infuriated her, especially since it was made clear to her that there had been a considerable correspondence between the two men—anger, despair, a threat of suicide on the one side; and on the other? She was not told, but she could imagine the

Olympian calm and assurance with which such a rigmarole had been answered.

Nor was her anger in the least reduced by the obvious—the only too obvious—fact that her parents regarded Gerald Harwood as so much the deliverer of their young daughter from the snare of the fowler (into which she had been in no danger of falling, even if it had been there) as to tell him that they would be glad to see him whenever he chose to come over.

Meantime, Jessica had lost no time in finding herself a new situation as amanuensis to the sub-editor of a popular weekly, one after her own heart. In this office, with its busy, impersonal atmosphere, she felt at home and happy, and was already well on the way to recovery from the humiliations of the *affaire* Bardell when she learned of the epistolary interference of Gerald Harwood.

Emma was distressed to find that he had written to tell Jessica of his intervention. True, she had not asked him *not* to do so, but it had never occurred to her that he would dream of it, she told Jessica, who said, “You don’t know much about Gerald Harwood, Mother!”—surprised to realise how much she herself seemed suddenly to know. Taken to task for her lack on this matter of what her father called ‘nous’, Emma said that she did not think Jessica need be so very put out, adding, “You would never have answered the letters yourself!—you’d just have thrown them on the fire.”

“Of course I should. It was what I told you to do if any more came, and that would have been an end of the whole affair! I was leaving the office, and no man could be so foolish as to pursue a girl who made it so obvious that she did not desire his attentions—if that’s the word! Handing over his stupid letters to a mere acquaintance of mine has given the silly business an importance it wouldn’t otherwise have had. I cannot *think* why you did this, Mother. You knew how furious I was at his coming down here uninvited, poking his nose into things that don’t concern him.”

“I think he believes they do, Jess. He is very fond of you . . .”

Jessica shrugged that opinion away. She had her own ideas of Gerald Harwood's emotional responses to their friendship and had flattered herself that she knew how to deal with them.

Emma said, "He admires you very much, Jess, but he thinks you are too—ingenuous—is that the word?—and that men are likely to misunderstand."

"Ingenuous, yes. Meaning frank, open, innocent," Jessica said. "I don't care in the least what he thinks or doesn't think. Please don't encourage him to come here, Mother."

"Then you must write to him yourself and tell him you don't wish him to come," said Emma, but Jessica declared firmly that she would neither write to tell him not to come nor speak to him if he did. "He's your concern and father's," she said. "And you're welcome to him." But she did not believe that he would come.

In the end, however, partly because she saw that her mother was very distressed about the whole affair, she did write. Not to tell Gerald to refrain from accepting her parents' invitation, which she felt constrained to ignore, but to express her intense displeasure at his interference in what she called 'the Bardell asininity'. After that it was unthinkable, to her mind, that he would accept the invitation accorded him. At their first meeting she had taken the measure of this young man, and their subsequent friendship had been conducted accordingly. She had been wary and resistant of all tentative efforts to give it even the slightest twist in a more personal direction, which made it all the more infuriating that he should have put himself forward over this business of Hugh Bardell and his letters. He had, as that gentleman would have said, no *locus standi*.

She had not expected a reply to her letter of remonstrance, but one arrived—concerned entirely with the business of self-justification, her rejoinder to which was so phrased that she could not believe anything was left sound enough to form a basis for a continuation of their friendship at any level.

But here she proved to be completely wrong. For Gerald had made no bones whatever about accepting her parents'

invitation, and to her intense annoyance was to be found at her home at least once a week upon her arrival there from the office, shortly after seven. Since her tactics—of retiring to her room until supper-time, behaving throughout the meal as if he were not there, and greeting any remark directly addressed to her with the utmost brevity, and taking no part in the general conversation—did not move him to the realisation that she preferred his room to his company, she decided upon firmer measures, and betook herself to the theatre or to a concert on the evening of the week most favoured by the unwelcome visitor. Unluckily, this proved a considerable liability, as Harwood merely varied his choice of evening, so that before long Jessica grew very tired of spending to no purpose money she could not really afford to spend at all, and was soon driven to abandon this way of escape. Nor did other attempts meet with much success, particularly not betaking herself to her bedroom and spending the evening there until supper-time arrived; for this had soon to be abandoned because the room was too cold, and her mother, always ready to light a fire for any legitimate reason, was clearly not disposed to consider this to be such. Thereafter she was reduced to sitting downstairs with the family and the unwelcome visitor, but also with a book, making herself deaf to the conversation and to all efforts to draw her into it, even when it was obliquely aimed at her by the unwanted Gerald. (Such phrases as “Your daughter could tell you, I fancy,” or, “Well, I can’t answer for Jessica, of course . . .”) But this was an infuriating business because she could not concentrate on the book and knew that she was taking in nothing, her eyes doing no more than move across the page. In desperation, as the cold weather began to yield, she took to excusing herself on the score that she had letters to write, betaking herself for the purpose to her room, to which even Gerald Harwood, as she had found earlier, did not possess the hardihood to follow her.

But whatever she did he only laughed or pretended that he had not noticed her withdrawals, or made one of those infuriating asides to her parents, who ought, she felt, to have snubbed him on the spot; but it was clear enough that he had

their approval and was sitting pretty. There was no denying the good impression he had made upon them as a personable, well-informed young man, with 'a good headpiece on him' and no snob; to say nothing of their intolerable conviction that he had rescued their self-willed and self-sufficient young daughter from the snare of the fowler. In short, Ethie's 'lovely fella'.

But despite these factors in his favour, it took him some considerable time to wear her down. For one thing, this young man who so oddly impressed her parents was to Jessica remarkably like the Gerald whom she had met at Linda's party—the young man of the impudent remark, the appraising eye, who had made fatuous remarks and waltzed so very well—a performance upon which Drury had commented that he fancied the waltz was one of Harwood's 'more impressive gambits'. The use of that particular noun had puzzled her a little and later she had looked up its precise meaning—'an opening movement in chess to secure certain ends'. At the time she had thought only that Mr. Harwood was no favourite with Drury, who dismissed him with a vague unknown company as 'one of Linda's young men'. But certainly he bore little relationship to the young man of whom her parents now so warmly approved, and equally certainly Drury's use of the word 'gambit' had considerable point.

Given their attitude and the unyielding persistence of Gerald himself, it was probably inevitable that the threads of the friendship between him and Jessica should be gradually resumed again. With an increased wariness upon her part, however, though none at all upon his; for if there were two Gerald Harwoods there must also, she felt, be two Jessica Bonds—the one who was everlastingly aware of this fact and the one who could manage for considerable periods to forget it.

As a newcomer at the office she had not that year expected to be considered entitled to a summer holiday, and was therefore most agreeably surprised to find that her name had been included in the list that was sent on its rounds through the building in early May.

Among the members of the staff she gained a considerable amount of approval by asking them to make their own fixtures without reference to her, as she did not mind in the least what dates were allocated to her. Finding herself eventually put down for the first two weeks in September, she was overjoyed, and when the time came went off to the farm to make the acquaintance of its new inmate.

Kate had obeyed orders and produced the desired girl and Jessica had been very flattered when she heard that she had been given her second, never-used, name of Mary. Before her departure Emma had warned her against taking it for granted that Kate's little daughter would be as amiable as Andy had been as a baby. "Or you, either, for that matter," she added, "but goodness knows, after Ethie's tantrums I deserved you both!" Jessica had therefore arrived at the farm prepared to make all due allowances for her namesake, only to find that she was amiability itself, and quite adorable. She had not expected to find that at ten weeks old the baby would be so definitely a person, showing every sign of interest in her surroundings and not in the least intimidated by an unfamiliar face and voice. The more the merrier, she seemed to say, waving her perfect tiny hands and smiling at all comers. She was as fresh and sweet as the many springs of Bourne itself. This holiday, Jessica thought, was going to be quite the best of the very many happy holidays she had spent at the farm. The weather, too, though not very sunny, was warm ('for Bourne', they'd tell you there!) and though the skies were overcast, the rain did not fall. Moreover, she knew a lightness of heart that seemed compounded of several things—not least the sense of an unpleasant incident in her life already so deeply buried that she seldom found her memory concerned with it. With the securing of a post as congenial now as when she had obtained it over eight months ago, the arrival of the charming Mary, and Andy's presence still at the farm, her world swung true again.

It was, therefore, something of a shock when during her second week at the farm Gerald Harwood wrote asking her to become engaged to him. She would know, he said, that he would have the approval of her parents in making this

proposal and added a few other observations which, in Jessica's opinion, took a good deal too much for granted. She had no desire whatsoever to marry him and replied to his letter almost by return of post, and with a slightly ridiculous sense of repeating her effects. With no less celerity Gerald replied, accepting her decision but hoping they might still be good friends, in which he went considerably beyond Jessica's own efforts. She did not think the situation called for any further comment and tore the letter up.

Back in London in mid-September, life went on uneventfully. Her work at the office she continued to find interesting, and its pleasant, impersonal atmosphere was much to her liking. Gerald and she met for an occasional tea together in town, a week-end walk in Richmond Park or across Wimbledon Common, and on these latter occasions he escorted her home; but otherwise he did not come to the house—a circumstance upon which neither Sid nor Emma made any comment. Jessica enjoyed the walks, for September that year, though continuing overcast as to sky and low as to temperatures, still remained dry, and in consequence was excellent walking weather. Out-of-doors, free of the parental scrutiny and interest, their friendship, much to Jessica's surprise, and with certain reservations upon her part, seemed to have re-established itself upon its earlier foundations.

Nevertheless, she was not at all prepared for Gerald's suggestion one Saturday afternoon as they strode up the slopes of Petersham that, on her homeward way, she should look in upon his mother. "She has long wanted to meet you," he told her. "I said I would ask you to-day, but couldn't guarantee to produce you."

Jessica, taken by surprise, hesitated. She could see no reason why Mrs. Harwood should wish to make her acquaintance, but she had long cherished a definite curiosity about the French mother whose portrait Gerald had drawn for her, perhaps unwittingly, at their first lunch together. Marshalling her forces and remarking that it could only be a very brief visit, she agreed. Leaving the Park, they walked on down the hill, soon to turn off from it into a quiet road and to stop a few yards

down at Number Fifteen—a pleasant detached small house standing behind a neatly trimmed hedge of beech and an equally tidy square of grass. The flower-bed that ran up to the front step looked empty and forlorn, save for a silver-grey edging of neatly trimmed pinks, but would shortly, Gerald told her, be planted with bulbs; and over the porch of the house a clematis was carefully secured. The effect, thought Jessica, was, as her father would put it, neat but not gaudy.

Said Gerald, "Even after all these years in England I believe my mother still considers it an extravagance to grow flowers. If she had her way even this diminutive grass patch would be sporting winter greens!"

He put his key in the lock as he spoke, turning back to smile at her, then standing aside to let her walk in. Preceding her along the little square hall, he opened a door and ushered her into a room in which burned a small bright fire, from a chair at the side of which rose a slight woman who bent upon her a quick, keen glance.

"Ah," she said to Gerald, "so you did manage to persuade her! How do you do, Miss Bond?"

"She was in an unusually tractable mood," her son told her.

"Well, it's very kind of her to bother with an old woman. Sit down, Miss Bond, and slip off your coat. You haven't had tea?"

"I can never persuade her, these days, to have tea out with me," said Gerald.

"Well, I'm sure she will stay and have it with me."

"With *us*," Gerald amended.

"I *am* expected home . . ." Jessica tentatively opposed this suggestion.

"Could we telephone, perhaps?"

"We are not on the telephone. But I'm sure nobody will be unduly worried if I'm just a little later than usual."

"Then we can have a quiet hour before Gerald sees you on to your bus." She walked across to the table beneath the window upon which tea-things were set, and lighted the contraption beneath the shining kettle. "Would you like to

retire for a few moments while we wait for the kettle to boil?"

Jessica thought not, but Gerald slipped out of the room, whereupon his mother said, "I've heard a good deal about you, Miss Bond, so it's a particular pleasure to meet you at last."

While Jessica wondered what, exactly, Gerald had told her and also why he had told her anything, since she had not thought that young men talked to their mothers over-much of their young women friends, the kettle began to sing and her hostess rose and slightly lowered the flame beneath it.

"Gerald, you know, has had a good many young women friends, but, with a single exception, you are the only one of whom he has ever spoken. The rest have been no more than names to me."

Jessica murmured something polite to this, wondering if she would have done better to have left the room as had been suggested and Gerald better to have remained in it. And she rather wished he would come back. When he did his mother said, in a light, almost casual tone of voice, "Oh, Gerald, you didn't tell me that Linda Hamilton was engaged."

"For the very good reason, my dear Mother, that I didn't know."

"Did you not? But it's announced in to-day's *Times*."

"But not, I think, emblazoned on the front page. I'm afraid I don't often look at the social columns. I can never imagine who are the people who do."

"Inquisitive ones, like me, I expect. Do you know the young man? Peter Claydon was the name, I think—Lieutenant Peter Claydon."

Gerald said, "We've met."

His mother turned to Jessica.

"I expect you know Miss Hamilton?"

"Oh yes, but not very well. I haven't seen her for a long time. It's her brother I know best in the family, but he's a doctor and went to the war very soon after it began."

"Is there not another brother? In the law, I believe."

"Yes, he's a barrister—he's at the war also."

"And Miss Linda, too, I understand."

"I believe she is nursing somewhere in England," Jessica said, wondering why these questions were being addressed to her, for it was clear that she already knew the answers. At the most she could only be confirming what she had already learned from Gerald.

"And you? I think Gerald told me you were on a paper."

"Yes—a new monthly *Review*, unfortunately an early war casualty. I now have a secretarial job on a very different kind of paper."

"So . . ." said Gerald's mother and then, "Well, now tea is ready, I think."

The cups were handed, together with small, obviously home-made cakes, which Jessica sampled and pronounced as good as they looked. "Not in the least like war-time cakes."

Her hostess smiled.

"Ah, that is because of the eggs. Powdered eggs are not at all the same thing. You see, I keep a few hens. Gerald does not approve. He thinks the wired run spoils the look of the garden, but I tell him it is more important to have new-laid eggs than a few more yards of garden. And hens are quiet creatures, they don't bark, or sing in the Dawn Chorus."

Gerald said that they did, after their fashion—a murmur, quite distinct; to which his mother said that *that* would wake no one. *Au contraire*.

Jessica smiled, remembering something Gerald had said to her over their first lunch together—that his mother was well able to hold her own in an argument. Nevertheless, she was surprised to have been asked so many questions, for she had been told from her childhood that this was unmannerly unless you knew people very well. Yet it was difficult to feel offended, the questions were asked so very politely and only one of them was about herself, though her hostess made her feel that she was very interested in her—in what she thought and did—for herself, and not merely because she was a friend of her son's.

The time passed very quickly, but at last she said she was afraid she must go, for her mother, who was expecting her home to tea, would be wondering what had become of her,

and as she spoke the telephone bell rang and Gerald went out into the hall to answer it.

"You know," said Mrs. Harwood, rising to help Jessica on with her coat, "I always felt Gerald was a little fond of Miss Hamilton. At one time he used to see a good deal of her, I think. But for some months now I seem to have heard nothing of her. However, that is explained, of course, by this news of an engagement elsewhere."

Gerald's voice at the door. He had got into his coat and was waiting to escort Jessica on the first stage of her homeward journey. He addressed his mother.

"It was Uncle John. He wanted us to go round there this evening but I suggested he and Mavis came here instead. That all right?"

"Perfectly. We have a fire here, which Mavis, I'm sure, would think an extravagance in her own home so early in the autumn."

The adieux were made, and having offered her thanks for the 'delicious tea and cakes', and been told that she must come again soon, Jessica was shepherded out of the room by Gerald.

"Train or bus?" he asked, as they went along.

Jessica chose the bus, which she could get at the foot of the hill instead of walking through George Street. She had a sudden desire to be alone. Or did she mean out of Gerald Harwood's company?

"How well your mother speaks English," she said, glad to find so suitable a subject for conversation to hand. "Even the aspirates don't trip her up."

"She wouldn't like not to be able to pronounce her own surname. And she has been here a good many years, you know, and in her own home from childhood upwards must have heard almost as much English spoken as French."

If he guessed that it was the aspirate in 'Hamilton' rather than in 'Harwood' which had moved her to the comment, he had turned that corner very neatly, she thought. All the same, she felt that he had not been too pleased at his mother's introduction of Linda and her family into the conversation.

"You made a good impression," he told her as they stood together at the bus stop, and though he smiled at her as he spoke she felt distinctly embarrassed, for she had not realised (or suspected) that she was in any way 'on appro', though she had sensed an implied criticism in that "So . . ." which had followed upon the recital of the Hamilton family's war efforts and her own reply to that "And you?" to which the questioner, she felt, already knew the answer.

On the journey home she decided that, pleasant though the meeting had been, it was, nevertheless, a mistake. She felt that she had lost another point to Gerald in this tussle between them and that it followed almost automatically upon having lost the first one—by consenting to the resumption of the friendship. She wondered if Gerald had told his mother of his proposal and her refusal. She thought not, for Gerald would not publicise his failures, she felt, even to his mother, perhaps particularly not to her. It was, however, clear that she knew of the friendship, and the suggestion, if indeed it actually came from her, that Gerald should bring her along to see her was probably founded upon a desire, now that Linda was no longer on the *tapis*, to make the acquaintance of the girl who was.

It was, however, a matter of surprise to Jessica to consider Linda as ever having been in any such situation. She had always thought of it as the other way round, accepting Gerald, in Drury's phrase, as 'one of Linda's young men', which had sounded as nearly disapproving as anything Drury was ever likely to say. Certainly, despite what his mother had said when he was out of the room, Gerald had sounded extremely detached about Linda's engagement.

Arriving home, she did not say where she had had tea, only that she had had it. She saw that it was assumed she had had it with Gerald, which, as far as it went, was correct.

At Richmond, Simone Harwood was saying to Gerald that she thought Miss Bond a very intelligent girl, and so nice-looking'. No, not *pretty*—such a silly word! Her colouring was charming, of course, and belonged to that red-gold hair,

but it was the shape of her face—its good bones—and the way the eyes were set in her head that made it such a pleasure to look at her. Her face had what the artists call 'drawing'. The *tout ensemble* reminded her of the faces she had seen in some of the pictures in the English picture galleries.

"Burne-Jones . . . Rossetti, I think," Gerald told her. "They're no longer in favour, you know. Girls don't look like that any more. Our artists have discovered for us the *jolie laide*."

Simone said she thought it a pity, and then asked, "Do you want to marry . . . Jessica?"

"She won't have me."

"She's too good for you, I think, Gerry."

"I thought you might think so. I daresay you're right."

"But of course! You should marry someone as self-centred as yourself—it would be extremely good for you."

Gerald laughed.

"You are, upon my word, a most exceptional mother of an only son."

"I am aware of it. Most women are fools with their sons—and *about* them. They think they have been so very clever to produce them. As if it had anything to do with *them*!"

"You ought to have had daughters. You could have brought them up to know better."

"It would have been a very pleasant change. All my life I have been surrounded by men—all arguing and disputing—and letting their food get cold while they do it. And you're as bad as any of them."

"Well, when it comes to argument, you don't do so badly yourself. There's another thing, too, for which you get good marks. Most mothers of your standing would think Jessica not quite good enough for their 'darlings'."

"If I knew what *is* my standing I could perhaps agree with you, but I don't know what it is. We belong to a large untidy section of the community—the *bourgeoisie*. Your Jessica, so you've told me, comes from good farming stock. What could be better? I can see for myself that she has been well brought up, and that she's charming and intelligent. But I am by no

means certain that you ought to be encouraged to marry her."

"Why not?"

"It is a mistake for a young man to marry one girl because another won't have him."

"If we're back to Linda, she was never invited to 'have' me. Linda has a crowd of admirers—she's a heartless flirt. And not very intelligent, if the truth must be told, but remarkably attractive. No wife for a poor man."

"Then Lieutenant Claydon is *not* poor?"

"Very much to the contrary. He's that rare creature—an artist with a considerable private income. Linda will be very much at home in the atmosphere of wealthy Bohemia in which, after the war, she will find herself."

Simone said, smiling, "Methinks the gentleman doth protest too much."

"Quite wrong. Linda wouldn't at all suit me as a wife—she's for fun and games. However, I'm sure you're delighted to have made the acquaintance of the young woman you've been so curious about for so long."

"But of course. Is it permitted to ask if she is in love with you?"

"Certainly it's permitted. The answer is 'no'. I don't think she knows what love is."

"And you do?"

"I know what *I* mean by it. My attraction *for her* is simply my attitude to the war—and my point of view about its origins."

"Poor child! And hers for you?"

"Her appearance and her intelligence, combined with her almost unbelievable innocence of mind."

"You leave something out, *mon enfant*. The fact that you find her not too . . . accessible."

"My dear Mother!"

"It is true, is it not?"

"You're a wicked woman. I refuse to answer."

"It is just as well. Here are your aunt and uncle. Go and let them in."

A week later Gerald told Jessica that he was shortly to be

released from the work he was doing and would then, he supposed, be drafted with all speed into one of the fighting services; after which statement he asked her to marry him.

She wished he had not given her this piece of information as a prelude to his proposal, for she still cherished the belief that, holding the views he did about the war, it was particularly praiseworthy he should not seek exemption from the common lot of young men. She did not know until much later that Gerald would find it considerably easier to 'join up' than to face the consequences of explaining why he could not; and so, with her, had gained marks for valour to which he was not entitled.

Nevertheless, she refused him, being still in the state of mind which had moved her when at the farm to reject his suggestion of an engagement. Apart from the feeling that she was being rushed unfairly into making the most important decision of her life, she faced the fact that her relationship with Gerald was much more narrowly set since his interference in the *affaire* Bardell, and was quite unable to understand why he should be so surprised and, yes, mortified, by her refusal to elevate so cool a relationship to the plane of love and marriage, though, to be sure, he hadn't mentioned love. Gone was the mood in which he had received her refusal of an engagement; and no suggestion now of their still remaining friends. Instead he gave her a short interval in which to reconsider her decision, and if, at the end of it, she was of the same mind still, then it would be wiser if they did not meet again. His attitude affronted her, for both his proposals had been so very business-like and matter-of-fact, and she had supposed, a little forlornly, that this was because of his French blood. The French had lovers and they had marriage, but perhaps it was a fact, as appeared in such French novels as she had read, that the two things were always and entirely separate. Nevertheless, Gerald's way of asking her to marry him she found particularly unattractive. He might, she thought, have been engaging a housekeeper. If he had said that he loved her! That he hadn't, and that he should have proposed to her so soon after the announcement of Linda's engagement, were

things which seemed to have their roots in the same soil.

The more she thought about it the more convinced she became of this. He had been nonchalant enough over his mother's announcement of the publication of Linda's engagement, but she was sure that hearing of it had afforded him not the slightest surprise, for quite certainly he had known in which quarter that particular wind was set, and that Linda was lost to him—and had known it for some time.

How long? As long ago, certainly, Jessica decided, as the quickening of his friendship with her about the time she had gone to the Bardell office. Maybe, in some ways, he had even found her a pleasant change, since she was interested in affairs of the day, in particular in the background to the war, and, it had been clear from the first, he found it pleasurable to air his knowledge upon a subject of which she had frankly acknowledged her abysmal ignorance. Also, that first meeting after Linda's birthday party was not casual—he had deliberately sought her out at the office.

So, she now reflected, as early as all that he probably suspected that Linda's affections were stayed elsewhere, and gradually she, Jessica, had become the second string to his bow. Everything that had happened since then seemed to her now to underline that fact. Why else should he have interfered over the Bardell incident, have arrived uninvited at her home, taken it upon himself to answer letters not addressed to him and cleverly manœuvred himself into her home and her parents' good books?

There was nothing reprehensible, she supposed, about this, and yet in some odd fashion it offended her. Perhaps because it had all been done in what seemed to her now so cold-blooded a fashion. It had never even remotely occurred to her that he was moved by anything stronger than a desire to continue what he found a pleasant friendship; the visits to her home had grown out of the first of them which had so angered her; missing the significance of that, she had, eventually, tacitly accepted the others. And after her refusal of his first proposal by letter, while she was at the farm, she accepted their cessation with the same facility.

About the present situation, however, there was one essential difference: whereas on the earlier occasion he had asked her to be engaged to him, he now asked her to *marry* him, and this was, she supposed, in view of his probably impending war service, which gave the situation a certain urgency and explained the businesslike but most unloverlike 'time-limit'.

But what explained the omission of all reference to affection or love? Except that he felt neither? Their relationship had been so completely unemotional, running not even to the most casual of kisses or the least lingering of hand-clasps, that she had never once thought of it as anything but a cool and on the whole pleasant friendship. Love's golden shafts had not touched her. Maybe, she told herself, she was one of Stevenson's 'anæmic and tailorish persons', incapable of being involved in a love affair. But she hoped not. What, at the moment, she was trying not to be involved in did not seem to her to be a love affair at all, however you looked at it.

Somehow or other when, a week later, as they were walking across the Park in the direction of the Ham Gate, Gerald asked for his answer, she was able to get the gist of these self-communings into speech that at least *sounded* like sense. Gerald listened without interruption and when, feeling deflated and extremely foolish, Jessica floundered into silence, he stood still, put out a hand and stayed her progress. She saw that he was smiling.

"I see that I've been behaving too well," he said. "Well, that's a state of affairs which can easily be remedied," and pulling her into his arms he proceeded to do it.

This demonstration was considerably more than Jessica had bargained for, since kissing, of any sort, had been no part of their friendship; but at least he now said what she wanted to hear. That he was in love with her, and had been for a long while, even if the next minute he spoiled the effect by saying, "Why else should I keep asking you to marry me?" For to this question Jessica herself had already been able to find too many answers.

Having at last secured her promise, Gerald at once let it be

known that he meant to lose no time in sealing the bargain, as if he thought she might change her mind. Emma and Sid's pleasure in the engagement was a little dashed by this. They had not expected to lose their daughter so soon, and Jessica was not very old—barely twenty-two—an argument at which Gerald laughed and told Sid that it 'came well' from him who, on his own word, was married soon after his twenty-first birthday!

"I'm twenty-five: You can't expect me to take such an argument seriously. Also, there's a war on and I'd like to have a little married life before being whisked off into one or other of the Services. Besides, there's another, even better, reason. There's a chance of my being able to take over the lease of a small house in my neighbourhood at the end of the month."

The present lessee, he explained, was a Government servant, and was shortly being moved to Wales. Through a few strings his mother could pull, the lease could be made over to him for three years, with an option to renew. Moreover, the present tenant would be glad to sell certain fittings, which would save a good deal of time (and money, he might have added, but didn't).

"It's practically impossible," he said with truth, "to find a small house to rent anywhere, and neither Jessica nor I would like to start our life together in rooms. This opportunity is a tremendous piece of luck. But there's no time to lose."

The strength of this argument was not to be contested and it went a long way towards overcoming Emma and Sid's reluctance to marriage following so hard upon the heels of the engagement, and also to dispose of Jessica's uncomfortable feeling that she was being rushed into marriage as she had been into an engagement, and before she had become familiar even with the latter state. Not until she heard that the house Gerald had hopes of was in East Sheen did she feel at ease, and this because it was only half an hour's journey by bus from Fairhill, and with this knowledge the last barrier between Gerald and his desire for an early marriage was down. Of East Sheen Jessica knew nothing save that many hundreds of years

ago it had, by some oversight, escaped being re-named 'East Richmond.

Taken to see the house, she had fallen in love with it, and with the neighbourhood. Very little building had as yet been done there, and there would be no more for the duration. So, still dominated by its history, its old houses, old walls, with the Park only three minutes' walk away across Sheen Common, which was itself almost upon the doorstep, Jessica felt that the horns of Suburbia blew but faintly. It all seemed too good to be true. Had there been nothing else to recommend the little house for which Gerald was negotiating, its position would have been sufficient for Jessica; but it had, in fact, a good deal else to be said for it. It prejudiced you in its favour as you walked in at the gate by reason of the air of substantiality bestowed upon it by its imposing double door of polished reddish wood—as handsome a front door, her father told her when he and Emma were taken over to see the house, as she could wish to see, and explained it by the unusual width of the entrance hall—and 'hall', this time, he said, winking at Jessica over her mother's head, was the right word.

The attractions of the neighbourhood for Jessica, however, were not wholly exhausted by a consideration of its semi-rural nature or the attractions of river and park. For, so Gerald told her, there was another small house near their own ('but less attractive, I think') in which her much-admired George Eliot had once lived.

"There's a plaque on the wall, so you can't fail to spot it," he said, "and even nearer—you'll pass it on the way to the Eliot shrine—there's something I expect you'll find as thrilling. Actually, you can see it from our windows—a little road, without houses or other buildings, but with a section of old wall running along on the right-hand side. Temple Sheen they call it."

Jessica said she had noticed the name and supposed it must be named after Sir William Temple.

"Full marks—the wall, so they say, is part of the wall that enclosed his garden."

"His 'Garden at Shene' which he writes of in his Essays! He

had orange trees, you know, and he says the fruit was as large as any he'd seen in his youth at Fontainebleau."

Gerald laughed.

"They couldn't have borne *fruit*."

"Oh, yes—he compares them favourably with those which came from abroad. It's all in his Essays. And he grew peaches and grapes, too. He's one of the few people (including me!!) who seem ever to have had a good word to say for the English climate."

"It must have deteriorated since his day."

At this stage in her life Jessica was not thus easily side-tracked. Pursuing her own line of thought, she said, "I wonder if he lived here with Dorothy Osborne after they were married? Her father opposed the marriage for a long while because Temple's father had sat in the Long Parliament and the Osbornes were royalists."

Taking her arm, Gerald said, "*And still the wonder grew, That one small head could carry all she knew!*"

She hadn't heard that note of mockery in his voice before, but she was to hear it a good deal from now on. Feeling snubbed and slightly ridiculous, the colour flooding her face, she said, "But I *like* the Past—I thought you did too!"

Gerald laughed.

"You know," he said, "I believe you could tell me which of her books George Eliot wrote when she lived here."

"I don't know *where* she wrote her books, and until a few minutes ago I didn't know she had ever lived here."

Still holding her by the arm, Gerald said, "If you aren't careful you'll make your mind a rag-bag of odds and ends of facts concerning famous people!"

Seeing her startled look, the deepened flush on her face, he pressed her closer to his side, laughed down at her and said, "*Dear little enthusiast!*"

Jessica said nothing, but the happiness drained out of her face as if she already knew how often, in the years to come, she was to hear that tiresome, silly phrase.

CHAPTER NINE

MUCH to her surprise and considerably to her concern, Gerald passed his medical examination at the hands of the Army doctors, B.2.

"You see before you, my dear," he observed to Jessica, "a lath painted to look like iron."

That Gerald, who looked so strong and fit should have been relegated to the second division of the second class in the Army category was a considerable jolt to Jessica, and she was considerably disconcerted that he did no more than shrug his shoulders when she asked the reason. But no young man, she thought, especially a young man who had never had a day's illness in his twenty-five years of life, could remain indifferent to the fact that the Army doctors had, in effect, declared him to be something considerably less than the strong, completely fit young man he had believed himself to be.

Against the anxiety aroused in her by this verdict and Gerald's withholding of any reason for it—which she could not but believe had been at least indicated by the Army doctors—she could offset the relief of which she was sensible that his classification would debar him from encountering the worst rigours of the war.

Prepared, when next she saw her mother-in-law, to find her in the same state of anxiety as herself, she discovered that Simone was not wholly surprised at the grouping. Gerald's father, she told her, had suffered from deep muscular rheumatism, which often laid him low for months at a time, and eventually shortened his life by damaging his heart.

"There can now be no doubt," she said, "that Gerald has an inherited disposition to the disease, although, apart from the fact that he is stiff-jointed, there has so far been no sign of it. As you must know, he prides himself very much on not having had occasion to see a doctor since he had measles!"

"Do you think the Army doctors *told* him?"

"Oh no, they probably asked him if he—or either of his

parents—had ever had rheumatic fever. All the same, he's so generally fit that I feel sure he would have been passed A.1 or 2 but for the angry scene in the House recently over the men coming back from the Front who should never have been passed fit for active service, and who have become, in consequence, a charge on the country. The doctors are being very careful at the moment."

Jessica said yes, she remembered reading about it, and then fell silent, reflecting that, had he been released a few months earlier, Gerald might have been numbered among these unfortunates.

"Don't look so worried, my child. As it has turned out, Gerald will come to no harm. In many ways Service life will be good for him. It will carry on the good work the war and your marriage have begun. You don't need me to tell you that Gerald is a social being and that parties act upon him like a magnet. Unfortunately, some of the things found at parties aren't good for people with a rheumatic tendency."

Remembering the occasion of their first meeting and the recent modest gathering they had given as a house-warming, Jessica agreed, and added, "I've sometimes wished I liked them better."

"I'm very glad you don't—you will adjust the balance. And don't run away with the idea that I'm suggesting Gerald drinks too much. All I'm trying to say is that it will be beneficial for him to drink *much less* for a while. And now I suggest we have a cup of tea and that you come and help me to choose a new hat."

"I wish he had told me," Jessica said over the tea, "but as he didn't tell you either I can't complain. But I still *wonder* why he didn't tell us both."

"Men, my child," said Simone, "are not always very ready to admit they are not quite all they have believed themselves, physically, to be. As a sex, you know, they're vainer than ours—at least their vanity goes deeper. Ours is limited to thinking ourselves more charming and attractive than, in fact, we are—a delusion, for most of us, very early and very easily shattered."

While Jessica stirred her tea and smilingly considered a statement she felt herself too inexperienced to be able to argue,

Simone said, "May I give you a word of advice? Don't raise this matter with Gerald and don't show more than just enough anxiety about B.2. You're expected to behave as though you haven't time to worry because you are so relieved that he will be less exposed to danger, as I'm sure by this time Gerald himself is doing."

This made Jessica smile.

"You are quite the frankest mother I've ever met," she said. "I've always considered my mother loved her children 'this side idolatry'—and haven't I been grateful for it! But *you* say things I never expected to hear any mother of a son put into words."

Simone Harwood laughed.

"You may have heard that the French are realists—perhaps that explains it. And now, what about my new hat?"

Despite this conversation—indeed, in some ways, because of it—Jessica felt much tempted to pursue the subject with Gerald. To leave it as it was seemed to her both unnatural and disturbing, and nothing her mother-in-law had said had made her feel any better about the situation. Rheumatism had always, in so far as she had ever thought anything about it, been associated in her mind with the discomforts of old age—what her father called an 'anno domini complaint'—and one unknown, he had been heard to boast, 'in my family'. To hear now that it could attack the young and be passed on from one generation to another was disturbing, and she felt that, for all his assumption of indifference, Gerald, who would remember his father's sufferings, must be feeling considerably disturbed.

But when she had ventured upon an approach to the matter, he merely said, "Now, Jess, don't fuss! You've been listening to mother, I suppose . . ." and had added, "You needn't trouble to deny it."

With some spirit she had said, "Of course I shan't deny it. But it's morbid of you to refuse to tell me anything about it. You can't really believe I don't *care* what the doctors told you?"

"Army doctors don't 'tell' you things; they ask you questions

if they say anything at all. They've all got the wind up at the moment because of the recent fuss in the House, and that's all there is to it."

"All right," said Jessica. She put her arm through Gerald's and laid her face against his arm. After a little pause Gerald lowered his head and put his lips to her hair.

Neither spoke.

Gerald was called up a few weeks later, and much of the misery of their parting was made up for by the fact that he was going into the Naval Air Force camp at Holtwell, some twenty-odd miles from Bourne, and that he would get week-end leave every six weeks, some of which he would be able to spend at the farm. They had together paid it two visits, once soon after they became engaged, and for a week-end since their marriage. If Gerald was not as in love with Fenland as was Jessica, he had much enjoyed his visits and had made himself popular at the farm, so that while he remained in the neighbourhood he would have there what Emma always referred to as 'a home from home'. Jessica nourished herself on this thought and on the equally satisfying reflection that she could, as Ethie put it, 'run down' for week-ends. What neither she nor anyone else anticipated was that the arctic weather which had set in early in January, and in which Gerald left home, would persist until the close of March. A Crimean winter, Jessica called it, and could have wept with misery to think of Gerald, his hereditary enemy at his heels, enduring camp life under such climatic conditions; for Gerald did not suffer even a mild winter day with any marked philosophy.

Rising prices, however, soon began to worry Jessica far more than the weather or the thought of Gerald at camp in it; for Gerald's salary was stationary for the duration. Jessica began therefore to look around for a means whereby she might add to it. She had not found it easy to run a small house on the housekeeping money Gerald had allotted her when he was at home, and things now were getting progressively more difficult. Though he had made it possible for her to sign cheques during his absence, she was careful to draw these only for rent, rates,

domestic charges like gas and electricity, and a small fixed sum for housekeeping. All the same, there were other things which needed upon occasion to be bought, and Jessica, who grew tired of looking at every penny before she spent it, and was determined not to overdraw Gerald's account or to run into debt, began to look around for a means whereby she might earn a little extra money. So when her late instructor at the Commercial School, with whom she had kept in touch through the years, wrote to ask her if she were able to take the place of a shorthand master at a local Commercial School who was being called up, she was overjoyed. And from then to the end of the war she betook herself four mornings a week to the School, which was very busy, since the middle-class girls who had just left school were all anxious to get what they referred to as a 'secretarial post' in some Government office. Some of them showed promise and were interesting to teach, but of a considerable majority Jessica realised that their hopes of getting a post anywhere, even during war-time, were slender in the extreme. However, her own immediate problem was solved, and her measure of independence pleased and satisfied her.

It had been arranged that Jessica and Simone should take it in turn to spend their nights under the same roof. They both stoutly maintained that neither was nervous, but Gerald had exacted a promise from each that she would, nevertheless, do as he suggested. "I'd detest sleeping alone in a house even for a few nights," he said, "and I shall be worried to death if I think either of you is doing it." But although Jessica, at least, meant to keep her word, there were days when it seemed madness to attempt the journey, and, truth to tell, she was not sorry. Her mother, of course, was worried, seeing the quiet neighbourhood on the edge of the Park and Common as the wilds of the country, but she would, Jessica knew, have been just as worried to think of her making her way in the evenings to the point where she could pick up the Richmond bus, always supposing it to be running in such icy conditions. "I have neighbours," she solaced Emma, "easily summoned, if necessary, by a knock on the wall. But I'm not nervous—don't worry."

She might have done so, all the same, if she had known of the trips Jessica took into Richmond and back on certain evenings soon after Gerald's departure. Having discovered that meetings of the Union of Democratic Control were held at intervals in a private house in Richmond, she betook herself there whenever notice of a meeting reached her in time. One such occasion occurred towards the end of February, soon after the newspapers had carried a story of a German retreat along a broad section of the British Front—a less heartening story for the British High Command, it soon appeared, than for ordinary folk reading their newspapers, to whom it looked as if, after the immense strain of Verdun, the enemy was beginning to crack. But it soon appeared that the Germans had retired to a much shorter fortified line—a piece of strategy of which Hindenburg, fresh from his successes on the Eastern Front, had been in charge. The British people took what comfort was to be extracted from the fact that, brilliant piece of strategy though it was, it remained a retreat.

At the meeting on this particular evening one or two of the speakers among the audience had made reference to Russia, had even appeared to believe, as people had done at the beginning of the war, that the 'steamroller' would soon go into action and flatten Germany out. Presently a quietly-dressed, middle-aged woman arose, and in a few carefully-phrased sentences informed the company that there was no Russian steamroller. She was, she said, a Russian married to an Englishman, but she had relatives in Russia and had very recently heard from a brother that some very grave news from Russia might be expected. She had been given no particulars, she said, but there seemed no doubt that she was intended to infer that Russia would soon be out of the war altogether.

Writing to Gerald, Jessica passed on this piece of information for what it was worth (in his subsequent letter he did not appear to think it was much); but it was not of the war she talked in the letters which she wrote to him twice a week, the second of them timed to arrive, with a freshly-baked cake, for the week-end. She filled them with accounts of her busy days, making them sound much more exciting and amusing than in

fact they were. Gerald's letters, to her relief, had not shown the distaste for his new life which she had expected, though he was often moved to the satirical comment, his pen dipped in gall. None of them, however, brought very clearly to her mind the young man she had married, who was, she decided, a much more complicated human being than might be deduced from these letters. Maybe, she thought, he had little time for letter-writing and, clearly, did not enjoy it as much as she did.

In all of them he complained bitterly of the cold, and up on that exposed plain of Holtwell she could readily believe he did not exaggerate. That he had not, so far, availed himself of the standing invitation at the farm must be placed, she supposed, to the arctic winter, with special reference to Fenland, which, clearly, he thought an outpost of the North Pole.

During the three months of their married life which had preceded Gerald's departure to camp, Jessica had discovered that, as a husband, he was by no means the polite, considerate young man who at Thelma Road had moved swiftly to open a door, or to take a loaded tray from Emma—a discovery, however, which did not surprise her very much, since she had always believed his behaviour there to be no more than a piece of deliberate window-dressing. It was true that the running of a small house, even in war-time and with no assistance, did not take up the whole of her day, but it was work to which she was unaccustomed, and it tired her considerably, and soon after the preparation and clearing away of the evening meal she felt that bed was the only possible place. Gerald, however, ensconced with paper or book in the most comfortable seat by the fire, looked at first surprised and then vaguely offended when, soon after ten o'clock, she said she must go to bed. For Gerald, who was quite certain that working all day at an office desk was much harder than the effort expended in keeping a six-roomed house clean, shopping in war-time circumstances, cooking an evening meal and dealing with the aftermath, never wanted to go to bed before midnight, and was insensible to the fact that his preparations for it at that hour roused Jessica from her first slumber and that she found it difficult to get to sleep again.

Nor did he bother with the fact that he was a sorry riser and that it would be Jessica who would be downstairs well before seven in order to get a fire and breakfast—and Gerald out of the house by eight o'clock for the eight-fifteen from the station, a good quarter of an hour's walk away.

And this was no easy matter, for Gerald was as loth to rise from his bed as he was to betake himself to it, so that Jessica would start the day with a small grievance in her mind—that Gerald did not care in the least how many times she ran up and downstairs, while preparing breakfast, to make sure he had not gone off to sleep again. Herein, had she been looking for it, was confirmation of her decision that to carry on at the office 'for the duration' after her marriage, as had been suggested, would be a mistake. For she would never have been able to arrive fresh and punctual at the office after her matutinal struggle to ensure Gerald arriving in good order and to time at his. It was a pity, she reflected, that one could not be informed on such matters before marriage, or that she felt qualms about suggesting that Gerald should sleep in the spare room if he meant to sit up until midnight. However, maybe the Navy (even though at Holtwell it operated in aeroplanes and not ships) might be able to prise him out of a habit into which he seemed to have set firm.

When she chided her mother-in-law with having indulged her son in this matter, Simone said, "*Au contraire*, my child. I had a bell fixed above his bed connected with the kitchen, and while breakfast was being prepared it was rung at short intervals. It would have awakened the seven sleepers, but if it failed to awaken Gerald, then he went breakfastless to town."

Upon hearing this Jessica said she wouldn't have believed it of her, and that she couldn't bear to think of Gerald going off on a wintry morning, or any other, without having eaten anything. To which Simone replied calmly, with a smile, "Then I see nothing for it, my dear, but the stairs."

Gerald's first leave fell in mid-March—the coldest March, so later said the experts, for a quarter of a century. He hoped, he wrote, to reach home about nine o'clock. Jessica prepared a meal which would not spoil if the train was late, and with a fine

gesture of munificence lighted a fire in their bedroom, reflecting that Gerald had probably not seen a fire (unless he had managed to get to the farm) since his arrival at camp. And certainly not a well-laid table, though the food, he reported, was good—it came from the Fens and not from Australia, which, she was later to hear, exported only four-headed rabbits! The bedroom fire, she reflected, as it leapt to sudden life after a sulky start, and the one she meant to light also on Saturday and Sunday evening, would probably render her coal-less before her merchant could deliver the order she had placed with him several weeks ago; but that was a problem for to-morrow.

Gerald's train was a quarter of an hour late, he said upon his arrival, and seemed somewhat piqued that Jessica had not been at King's Cross to meet him. However, his spirits rose when he saw the meal prepared for him and the sparkling table drawn up to the fire. Gerald cold was nobody's company. Gerald fed and warm could be an interesting and lively companion. And, clearly, he was delighted to be home again, and would not listen to her account of the behaviour of the Thames Valley weather—for sheer malignity it couldn't hold a candle to that of Fenland! It had been altogether too outrageous for him to get as far as Bourne, and at Holtwell it was unadulterated hell, where he could think of nothing but the cold and that line—or lines—from Keats (wasn't it?) she was once so fond of quoting . . .

"And still am," she assured him. "For weeks past I've found myself muttering it every morning on my way to Richmond.

. . . ah, bitter chill it was!

The owl, for all his feathers, was a-cold:

The hare limped trembling through the frozen grass,

And silent was the flock in woolly fold.

I think it's the chilliest passage in English poetry."

"It must have been a cold year when Keats wrote it!"

"They kept no records. Are you warm now?"

"Can't believe I was ever cold. This is a good pie."

She knew it was. She said, "Are you still sceptical about the Russian report?"

"There are plenty of rumours flying around, but there always are. About everything."

"Would it make much difference to us if Russia gave up?"

"I shouldn't think so. Do you remember our wondering, at our first lunch together, why the Russian serfs should fight for the Czar?"

"Yes. I've never yet found a reason, except that when a country declares war the people always do fight. Perhaps the Russians have had enough and are deserting."

"And perhaps not."

"That woman sounded very sure. She was very calm. The words she used were 'grave news'."

"Well, we shall see. Let's forget the war for the week-end, shall we? Let's talk about Us."

When the meal ended, under cover of 'fetching the coffee', Jessica slipped upstairs to see how the fire was. A fire in your bedroom was a luxury indeed, and she was surprised, as she stood in the doorway gazing at it, to find her thoughts suddenly swept back to that house in Hampshire where fires in bedrooms were all part of the ordinary business of running a house. Except for the kindness of the maid, the fires were the only pleasant thing she remembered of that week-end, and she wondered if they were still lighted or if, like everyone else, the servants had begun to count each knob of coal that was put on a fire.

She arrived back in the dining-room to find Gerald about to add a sizeable one to the fire there and halted his hand with her sharp cry of protest.

"It's after half-past ten," she said, pouring out the coffee.

"Well, let's sit down here a bit where it's warm. I know, let's get our dressing-gowns and undress—then we can go up when we like and not freeze."

"All right," she said. "You get the dressing-gowns while I finish down here."

As usual Gerald looked as if he didn't consider this a fair division of labour, but did manage to lift himself, though with considerable reluctance, from his chair.

"By the way," he said, "what have you arranged about mother? I must see her."

"I asked her to come to lunch to-morrow, but she suggested we went to her instead."

Gerald's face clouded.

"Must we? I'd banked on one whole day in the warm."

"I'm afraid we must. It's too cold for her to come out, I think. After all, she's over sixty."

It always surprised her to remember her mother-in-law's age, particularly as she looked much younger. She must have married much later in life than her own parents, Jessica supposed, for her mother was just fifty, her father forty-seven. She never thought of them as old, merely middle-aged; but sixty seemed to take her mother-in-law a long way into what Sid called 'the sere and yellow', which was where, in his more facetious moods, he already placed himself.

"We can walk across the Park," she said to Gerald. "It's days since I've been in it. A walk will do us both good."

"Says you," Gerald commented. "I suppose you'd be surprised to learn that I often walk *miles* a day around the camp—to say nothing of morning drill."

"Nothing surprises me any longer," Jessica told him. "But Richmond Park isn't Holtwell Camp. Be an angel and fetch the dressing-gowns."

A few minutes later, as she stood finishing the washing-up at the kitchen sink, Gerald's cry of delight came rushing down to her. "Come on up. Leave everything!"

But Jessica finished the washing-up, put the guard on the dining-room fire, locked up and took herself in due course upstairs, where she was received by a Gerald who seemed to have turned into a small boy again at the sight of a fire in his bedroom. Never in his wildest dreams had he ever expected to find such a thing, he said.

"It's for the first time in my life. Honest injun!" he told her. "All I *ever* had was a miserable little gas affair—and that was as horrid as it was infrequent. I don't have a French mother for nothing—fires in bedrooms were an unnecessary extravagance. It was warm once you were in bed!" He laughed

and showered kisses upon Jessica's face, tilting it up with the back of his hand. "Oh, Jess, you're a pet, but I hope you won't freeze next week for this!"

At the moment, she couldn't look as far ahead as that. She was a captive, netted in a familiar pattern of happiness.

Nor, during the enchantment of that first leave, shut in with love, did she remember something which, from the very beginning of her married life, had greatly puzzled her—the strange dichotomy which existed between Gerald the lover and Gerald the husband. To the role of the former he brought the imagination and understanding which made the act of love so unhurried and so satisfying; but to that of husband nothing but his sense of personal ease and the only too obvious belief that the domestic side of married life was nothing whatever to do with him, if not, indeed, below the dignity of the male.

So, during their brief span of life under the same roof, she could have counted on the fingers of one hand the times when he had filled a coal-scuttle for her, or carried it back to its place when she had done the filling, or bestirred himself to help her wash up after a meal. And if he carried a tray into the kitchen it was only because even he could see that it was plainly too heavy for her to lift, after which effort he would return to his seat by the fire, there to await, over paper or book, the arrival of coffee. He had, she was sure, no idea that his conduct was lacking in any particular. Nor did he realise that there were times when a quiet, understanding affection, manifesting itself in these small, mundane services, would, to her, have been worth all the love-making in the world, and left her *clothed with the heavens and crowned with the stars*.

A flaw in character, she wondered, or merely an attitude to be traced back to the more affluent days of his childhood? She could not decide and nothing that she knew of Simone Harwood seemed here to be of any use. But already in her short married life there had been times when she had felt that she was no more than a competent, not unattractive housekeeper, with whom Gerald was so kind as to go to bed.

BOOK THREE

CHAPTER ONE

THE end of the war, in Jessica's mind, was associated for the rest of her life with the death of her brother, who had escaped the hazards of war only to die of the influenza plague which ravaged the country that autumn of nineteen-eighteen.

On the Friday evening Gerald had arrived home unexpectedly, announcing that the war had collapsed and so, apparently, Jessica thought, had discipline at the camp! Life, he told her, was just about to begin again and he had gone out during Saturday morning to find something in which 'to celebrate' and also to look in upon his mother. But for Jessica the idea of peace was too immense to grasp; it was as abrupt and unreal as had been the beginning of the war, too staggering to be realised, even though, as Gerald had said, the signs of collapse had been manifest for weeks. He had not returned from his expedition when a telegram arrived for her, and as she opened the envelope and ran her eye over the message, it seemed, for a split second, to belong to the same state of irrelation. Then the words moved into position and yielded up their meaning. *Dear Andy died last night. Mother.*

She must have said "No answer" to the messenger, shut the door and walked back into the room in which she had just finished laying the table for lunch; but she did not remember doing any of these things. She stood by the table holding the telegram in her hand, staring down at it until she heard Gerald's key in the lock, when she let it drop on the table and walked away to the window.

Coming into the room, he saw the telegram, picked it up and ran his eye over it, then went across to Jessica and turned her round into his embrace. If he had spoken she would have fled from him, but for once Gerald was not ready with the suitable words, and would have felt better if she had cried upon his

shoulder. But at the moment all the tears she would presently shed were dammed back by shock. He was miles outside any understanding of her sense of irreparable loss, her grief for her parents, the angry impotence that tore her. An only child, he had no conception of the place Andy had held in her heart since, as a little girl of four, she had first set eyes upon him. Nor did he know that Andy's going from the world had, for the moment, left it empty.

In a few moments she withdrew herself from Gerald's already slackening embrace. He meant, she knew, to be kind; he was doing his best, but he and Andy had never been more than polite brothers-in-law. They were neither the same kind of person nor spoke the same language, and although Andy had never said so, she had always known that he wondered why she had married Gerald.

"I must go over to Fairhill," she said, with sudden urgency.

"What's the use? The telegram was sent from Bourne—if your father didn't go up with your mother when she was summoned, he's certainly on his way now."

The thought of her father making that long journey alone after getting her mother's desolating telegram was a sharp barb in Jessica's heart. It was most unlikely he had been there when her mother had received the telegram saying that Andy was ill. She said, "Well, that leaves Ethie alone. I *must* go over and see!"

"She may have gone up with your father. Are any of the neighbours on the telephone?"

"Yes, the Greenhams, at Number Twelve. But I don't know the telephone number."

"I'll go round to the Plough and see if I can get them. Meantime, come and sit by the fire and have a glass of sherry."

He unwrapped the bottle he had brought in, opened it, filled one of the glasses she had set on the table and handed it to her.

"Not the equal of the one we drank at Yalding last year, I'm afraid. Remember?"

She nodded. The last night of the first 'long' week-end he had had, which they had spent at Yalding in the Medway

Valley. The weather was abnormally hot, for the long, cruel winter had swallowed up the spring and landed them suddenly in midsummer. Jessica had curled up with fatigue on their last evening and Gerald had asked the landlord of the inn at which they were staying if he had anything on the premises worth drinking. After rummaging mightily he had produced a bottle of sherry wreathed in cobwebs, at which Gerald had looked with a wary, suspicious eye. But the landlord, brushing off the cobwebs, handed the bottle over for inspection, and had smiled upon them as they retreated with it. As if he were sorry for them, Jessica had thought—so young, poor things, and caught up in this awful war, of which they were reminded all day long by the pounding of the guns which came across the quiet riverside country.

Sorrier than he need be, Jessica had thought, seeing that Gerald had been in no danger. She had wondered why he had been so set on coming all the way to boat on the Medway, since they had a river of their own at home, where they could have disported themselves without hearing gunfire, and have slept in their own bed. But Yalding, he had told her, had been a part of his youth, for he had come there to stay with cousins before his father and mother had moved to Richmond, and it was on the Medway he had learned what she called his 'river tricks'. Maybe, she'd thought, he had been re-visiting the glimpses of the moon.

He came now and kissed the back of her neck.

"Sit still until I return—and remember your drink," he told her. "I oughtn't to be long."

Neither was he. He had got through at once to the Greenhams, he reported, and had spoken to one of the family who had told him that Jessica's father had gone off to Bourne directly he received the wire, and that Ethie was sleeping under the Greenhams' roof until her parents got back. She was all right—Jessica wasn't to worry. Everybody sent their sympathy.

"Anything I can do in the kitchen?" he asked, as she got up from her seat.

"No, it won't take a minute. I'd *rather* do it, please." The idea of eating anything was, she found, quite revolting, but to

go into the kitchen and dish up the meal was at least something to do. Sitting by the fire and staring at it was no good at all. She needed occupation, as Gerald saw—not without relief, for dishing-up was not among his strong points. So he let her go and within a few minutes she came back with the meal she had prepared with so light a heart that morning. No, in some other existence.

She set it before her own place at table and sitting down began to serve, as she always did except on the rare occasions when there was something to carve—a task to which she was never equal but which Gerald performed with the ease and precision which her mother brought to the task.

“You’ve given yourself nothing,” Gerald told her. “Going without food won’t help, you know. Finish your sherry.”

The food defeated her, but she sipped the sherry and thought it was a drink she would never again want to taste. She put her hand over her glass when he attempted to refill it; and at the end of the meal he told her to go and lie down—that he would clear up. Even the extreme novelty of this suggestion did not move Jessica to act upon it.

“I’d rather be doing something,” she said, and remained unshaken when he tried to insist. If there was anything worse than lying down when you felt neither tired nor sleepy, she said, she didn’t know what it was. Gerald, for a few seconds, looked slightly injured, but he accepted the position, helped her to clear the table, carried out the tray and remained to dry the plates and cutlery while Jessica dealt with the coffee.

It was as they sat drinking this by the fire that Gerald, in his favourite seat, and Jessica against his knees on a cushion on the rug, brought up a question which he had so far found no likely moment to introduce. Not that he felt this one was very propitious, but it was the best that was likely to offer.

“What,” he asked, “are we going to do about Eugene’s ‘do’ this evening?”

Eugene Raynham was an old acquaintance of Gerald’s who kept open house to his friends and associates on Saturday evenings in his Bloomsbury flat, and Gerald and Jessica had occasionally been among the company. But since his camp life

had begun Gerald had preferred to spend his week-end leaves at home, and Jessica, though she had often felt the company entertaining, seldom thought it worth the lateness of the hours it kept. In the stress of the last couple of hours she had entirely forgotten that Gerald had told her some weeks earlier that this Saturday was Eugene's birthday and that he had promised they would both put in an appearance if he could get leave.

She said, "I can't face it. Why not let him think you haven't got leave?"

"But I've been looking forward to it."

"Then please go without me."

"I can't leave you alone this evening, or you'll just give yourself up to being unhappy."

"It would be better than feeling—and looking—unhappy at a birthday party. You could make my—quite reasonable—excuses."

"Of course, but if you came with me it would take you out of yourself."

"I don't want to be taken out of myself!" she said and felt Gerald's arm round her shoulders, his face on her hair.

"Down with the Welsh!" he said, which was his way of telling her that she had pitched her voice at least half a tone higher than its norm, which meant that he preferred it when she didn't. It was one of many theories he had unloaded on those simple folk, Jessica's parents (not always to their amusement, though frequently to their bewilderment), that there was 'Welsh blood' somewhere in the family. But Jessica, who knew when she was being rebuked, was never much amused by this pleasantry, and this evening not at all. He felt her withdrawal beneath his hands as she said, "Need you make an argument of it? If you would like to go, please do, and offer my excuses. I shall not mind in the least being left alone."

"But, Jess, I *can't* leave you alone tonight!"

"Why not? You *want* to go, so please do. I expect you're in need of some entertaining company and good talk."

"I thought you would enjoy it too."

"Not this evening. I'm sorry to be such a wet blanket."

"It's not your fault."

It was, she realised, the most he was capable of. He couldn't—or wouldn't—deny that she was a 'wet blanket' but was handsomely prepared to admit that she wasn't being one on purpose, just to spoil his week-end. She knew that he had wanted—and expected—to make love to her this afternoon and then to have gone on, full of bodily satisfaction and loving-kindness to all men, to make himself an outstanding success at the party. She felt suddenly mean, as if she (and not Fate) had cheated him.

"All right, then," she said, reluctance dragging her voice, "I'll come." She thought, I can cry all night if I like—I shan't wake Gerald, after a party!

"I think that's very sensible, Jess," he said. "It'll take you out of yourself."

She gave up the argument, and didn't know that this was something she was to remember against him all their life together—that he had not had enough understanding to let her off a silly party on the day she heard that Andy was dead.

It was Andy's death, however, which brought Drury Hamilton back into her thoughts and, in the event, into her life.

Reaching home a few weeks after the signing of the Armistice, he had heard the news and immediately wrote her a note of sympathy, enclosing it, for forwarding, in the letter of condolence he addressed to her parents—a note so simple and unaffected that Jessica felt the hot tears pricking at her eyes as she read. It was the letter of one acquainted with grief, who did not flee from the sight of it. For it she sent the writer a brief note of gratitude and thanked him for the good wishes for her marriage, of which, apparently, he had only recently heard, and having done this she locked up his letter in her desk. Her decision not to show it to Gerald sprang from her assurance that he would consider such a letter at this date a mistake, and likely to 'upset' her again just when she was 'getting over' her loss. For his part, Gerald, having written suitably to his 'in-laws' and taken Jessica over to see them upon

their return from Bourne, and done his duty at the funeral, had clearly put the whole unfortunate business behind him. Already, and most reluctantly, Jessica was coming to see that, faced with the uncomfortable, disconcerting misfortunes and griefs of other people, Gerald would say (and look) all the correct things and then retire in good order. Of other people's troubles he felt nothing, except in so far as they impinged upon the normal course of his own life—her own loss of spirits at the time of Andy's death, as she was very well aware, had bred in him a certain impatience, not the less to be remarked in that it was wordless. Absent in spirit, he used fretfully to say of her, and this she did not deny; some part of her mind and thought ranged still after Andy wherever he might be, as if for a while he needed company. She knew that Gerald considered it morbid of her mother that she should have had her son's body brought home for burial in the cemetery (where she and Sid would one day lie), after a service in the church he had attended with the rest of them as a small boy. And morbid, too, of herself to have gone in and out of the room where the coffin lay and to sit there for short intervals, even though she did not go there to cry, though that, clearly, had been a relief to him. The idea of death offended him and by the death of the young he was scared.

All these things she came to know well, though they were never put into words. But she also knew that the dead, for Gerald, were for ever dead—they might, indeed, be said never to have lived. For to let them remain alive in his mind would have been a constant reminder that Death was no respecter of persons, that in due course he would call for all. For her, for him.

These reflections, then, were behind Jessica's suppression of Drury's note. It had so touched her heart that she did not want it blown upon by Gerald's air of disapproval—of Drury himself, as well as by what he had written. Having locked it away she never again took it out to read; but it gave her a little feeling of warmth and comfort to know it was there.

It was a few weeks later that Gerald received from his landlord a letter offering him the lease of his house at an

extremely reasonable figure. He explained that he was getting old and that his children had decided they would rather inherit the money than the property, and he thought it only fair to give the respective tenants the first opportunity of securing their houses. The figure asked was so modest, in this era of excessive prices, that Jessica was dumbfounded when, with an airy gesture, Gerald said he should decline the offer. Whoever bought it could not turn them out.

Not, Jessica pointed out, until the Rent Act was altered, and everyone she spoke to seemed to think that this would be done directly there was a change of Government. "I disagree," Gerald said. "With this shortage of houses, no Government will dare—the Act will stand for years yet."

So Gerald, to Jessica's dismay, wrote a polite note declining the offer and in due course received a letter from the present landlord informing him that the house had been purchased by a Mr. Reeves, who, he believed, was buying for investment.

"Don't worry your head about it," he said to Jessica. "Nobody's going to turn us out," and when Jessica said that she would feel much happier to know that no one was in a position to do so, he said, "Now leave this to me, Jess. If and when I buy a house I shall want one which will give us more scope." He didn't say for what and Jessica forbore to ask.

Apart from the relief and satisfaction which was shared by the whole country over the ending of the war, there did not seem, Jessica thought, to be very much that was calculated to cheer one in the contemplation of the state of the world it had left in its wake. The country had been propaganda-fed too long, and now mopped up all the new phrases with quite disheartening promptitude. The solid vote for Lloyd George at the Khaki Election, for which people seemed to blame the new factor, the Women's Vote (for which Jessica was not yet eligible), depressed Gerald and most of their friends, who maintained that, even if he had 'won' the war for us, he had already lost the peace, notwithstanding the fact that he had affirmed his allegiance to Wilson's Fourteen Points and had high hopes of the League of Nations. Behind him was a *gang*, instead of

the body of sensible men he might have had—a House of Commons, in fact, without any backing for the League. And in Paris there was Clemenceau, who called the ‘points’ ‘commandments’, and gave Paris a joke about them.

It was Simone who said, “Wilson should have gone back to America and expounded his Fourteen Points to the Americans, who know nothing of the problems of Europe, instead of going to Paris in the hope of influencing Clemenceau—for whom he is no match.” Nor did she take much consolation from Gerald’s assurance that the Germany we’d been at war with was not only vanquished but dead; the Kaiser fled, a revolution in spate, with the Red Flag flying from the Imperial Palace. She didn’t care for the idea of a Socialist Germany, she said, any more than for the Germany of the Kaiser.

But life, for Jessica, was more than the sum of its problems. She was nearly twenty-five when the Peace Treaty was signed in June, nineteen-nineteen, and she had been married only a few months short of three years. Soon after Gerald had settled down again to civil life he obtained promotion and a consequent increase of salary. Immediately upon giving her this news, he said, “You and I must have a child now.”

Now that the war was over, did he mean? or, Now that I’ve improved my position and income? And why ‘you and I’ instead of the more intimate ‘we’? Apart from their decision not to start a family during the war, the question of children had never been raised between them. She had thought that Gerald did not care overmuch for the young of the human race, since his enthusiasm for her attractive namesake at the farm had not been marked, and she had assumed that, at any rate, he did not find them very interesting at the baby stage. However, she now murmured something appropriate and, somewhat to her relief, the subject dropped. So, for some reason, she found, did her spirits.

Perhaps it was because he had chosen—and managed—his moment very badly, so much so that she found it a little difficult to control her risible faculties. For he had lost no time, upon entering the house one evening, in announcing his improved status at the office, and had not given her time to

congratulate him before he had dashed off at this entirely unexpected tangent. Anything more matter-of-fact, both in manner and speech, it would, she thought, be difficult to have contrived. His voice had no tenderness; he neither looked at her nor touched her. Nor, upon entering the house, had he given her the usual kiss. It was as if he had rushed home to deliver an ultimatum.

The moment stayed alive in her mind, for it seemed to her that there was something lacking—or something too much, perhaps?—in Gerald's abrupt, businesslike approach to this subject of parenthood. As if, she thought, this business of producing a child was a matter upon which their destiny as man and wife depended and had nothing whatever to do with love, passion, or even love of children.

If she had not by now learned a good deal about her husband, she might have wondered if he were seeking for some justification not of their own marriage but of the very institution of marriage. Gerald's positive attitude to life, however, put that out of the question. She had never had reason to believe that there was any trace of the Puritan in his approach to sex, still less of the belief that 'the acceptance of sex is immoral' which had hurried Weininger out of life at thirty, or of the apologetic Pauline admonition to the Corinthians that it was better to marry than to burn. It was not as a lover that Gerald invited her reluctant criticisms.

However, nothing was to be gained by pursuing these hares of speculation, and she turned back from the case and got on with the ordinary business of life. After the Spartan years of the war there seemed suddenly to be a great deal of it, especially of the social side, to which, clearly, Gerald attached considerable importance. The domestic help she had had during the war years had withered away when the war came to an end, but now that Gerald's position had improved she felt justified in getting the heavier work of the house taken from her shoulders. Having managed to induce a strapping young woman to come twice a week to do the turning-out, there seemed to Gerald no reason whatever why they should not repay some of the hospitality they received. In Jessica's mind he was speedily

confirmed as a social creature, a role in which he shone and which he immensely enjoyed, and never saw that the giving of parties made much work, and the clearing-up after them even more, nor remembered that young women engaged to do certain chores would not look favourably upon the aftermath of an evening party. When Jessica insisted upon staying up to put at least a little order into chaos in their diminutive kitchen he told her she was quixotic and betook himself to bed. However, she saw that the pattern of her life with Gerald was set, and after their first visit to Linda's fine house in Chelsea their circle widened. They betook themselves to the homes of people unknown to Jessica and with whom she seemed to have very little in common, and whose conversation, such as it was, revealed the fact that they did not speak the same language. On the whole, these occasions bored her and the late hours they entailed did not agree with her, since it was still she who must rise betimes in the morning and see that Gerald caught the usual train. With the exception of the Claydons, she was, too, under no delusion as to whom host and hostess (particularly hostess) were entertaining—Gerald, not his not very forthcoming young wife, who did not seem very much at home in their crowded rooms, nor very amused by some of the jokes that ran around, who did not smoke, and had the disconcerting habit of making a drink last throughout an evening.

"So dull," wrote one of them later to Gerald, excusing herself for not including Jessica in an invitation to a New Year 'do', "to be the only sober person at a party!" Though Gerald considered this an over-statement (for he would never admit that he had ever at any party been anything but 'merry'), he made it the subject of a terse lecture upon 'Going to parties', which Jessica combated with considerable spirit. But as it was a party at which the New Year would be not only welcomed but well and truly established before treks were made for home, Jessica felt that Gerald was taking a considerable risk in sending a wire which said, *Sorry, cannot celebrate without Jessica*. For he would have found it hard to have to leave before an hour at which she would be half-dead with fatigue, especially as New Year's Day that year came on a Sunday and there

would be no need to rise betimes, and hence no need to haste away. But—to his chagrin, she was sure—the wire was taken as final.

However, on a morning in June, 'twenty-one, with the first rain falling after a prolonged drought, Jessica's mind was not on parties nor the doings of the quarrelsome and apparently irreconcilable countries of Europe, but on the personal errand which was taking her to town—an appointment with an eminent woman gynæcologist in Harley Street.

After more than two years of alternate sulks over, and odious comment upon, their childless condition, Gerald had excelled himself by his concluding remark in a few tasteless observations he had suddenly thrown out one morning a fortnight ago as he had lain watching her twisting her bright hair on her neck. Jessica, who found these moods of her husband's almost unbearable, had listened to his lamentations with the silence she had learnt over the last two years to call up to her assistance, and then said, "Well, people often live together for years without having any children," and had instanced a couple whom they sometimes met at the house of Gerald's mother. "The Bedales have been married over seven years and have had none." Whereupon, Gerald had spat out, "Well, I wouldn't live with *you* for seven years without children!"

For a second Jessica stopped breathing. All the blood seemed to rush to her face and then to fall out of her body altogether. She turned away from the glass, and without a glance or word went out of the room.

Downstairs she was welcomed by Dinky, the half-Persian heliotrope kitten which her father had given her a few months ago, and whose graceful antics, absurd dignity and delightful combination of hauteur and affection warmed her heart and restored her sense of proportion. Having opened the kitchen door and put down the customary saucer of milk for him, she set about laying the table and cooking breakfast for one. For herself, she drank a cup of tea and ate a couple of biscuits, then covered up Gerald's bacon and egg and put it in front of his

customary seat, after which she collected a shopping basket and quietly slipped out of the house by the garden gate, cut across Temple Sheen, and so made her way to the main road, where she waited for a bus into Richmond. Long before she returned Gerald would be on his way to town.

The June morning was already hot and the day wore every aspect of becoming as oppressive as its predecessors. The weather that year seemed to be standing on its head—even the winter months had shown temperatures much above the normal, though the nights were cold; and such rain as had fallen had been described as 'toy showers'. This morning, heat and fury combined against her and, arriving in the town, she made short work of her shopping and sought the consolation of coffee and a bun before proceeding to the task in hand. Nor did this take her long. Dr. Alice Black was not having a busy morning. And she and Jessica had met before—during the early summer of nineteen-seventeen, as Dr. Black remembered after Jessica had re-introduced herself. "I came to find out if I could have children," she told her, then added, with a smile, "You said, I remember, that if I chose I could have half-a-dozen perfectly safely. I didn't want *any* during the war, but the war's been over for well over three years . . ."

Dr. Black smiled, but said nothing until she had turned over the pages of a large volume which she took from a drawer of her desk and had found in it the entry she wanted.

"There's nothing I can add to this," she then said.

"I see. Then would you think me extremely impolite if I asked you to give me an introduction—or whatever I should have—in order to see a woman specialist?"

"Of course not." She looked keenly at Jessica over her glasses and said, "Are you very anxious to have children?"

"I was—that is, I should have liked some. Now I'm not so sure. But I want to be quite sure I *can*, if I choose. I'm afraid I'm being dreadfully discourteous. But I hope you understand."

"Perfectly," said Dr. Black, smiling at her. "I should advise your seeing Miss Chadburn. You would prefer, I expect, to make your own appointment, but I'll put the matter

in train for you. I'm sure you'll have all the confirmation you wish."

Jessica thanked her and departed, and on the way home reflected that her smile had been very understanding. She's heard of men like Gerald before, I fancy.

But were they all as outrageous as Gerald, who had been told of that first visit to Dr. Black in nineteen-seventeen? She had given him her pleasant news in the next letter she had written to him, but when he answered it he made no reference whatever to it. Nor had he mentioned it on his next leave, nor on his return home at the end of the war, and Jessica's hurt pride had made it impossible for her to refer to it. If he must be so uncivilised, she had thought, he might at least have paid her the compliment of himself consulting a doctor. Or was he so ignorant as not to know that the 'fault' did not by any means always lie with the woman?

Nothing softened her anger against him, not even the confirmatory verdict she received on this hot June morning in 'twenty-one from the eminent person in Harley Street, though passing that on to him greatly strengthened her morale. She ignored his clumsy attempts to pretend that he had not uttered the words which stood like a naked sword between them. Nothing but a complete apology would meet the case, and that she knew would not be forthcoming. She longed to be able to get away and had thoughts of flitting to the farm for a while, but decided that she couldn't take this particular state of mind there without becoming vocal about it—and that was the last thing she wanted, for this was a situation between herself and her husband, not something to be discussed with anyone at all.

She therefore remained in her own home, contrived to be civil, if distant, to Gerald, slept in the spare room, turning the key in the lock; and had no satisfaction in her life at all except what was to be extracted from the passing on of Miss Chadburn's verdict. And this Gerald received in stony, sulky silence.

"I see," she commented. "I should have asked for the verdict in writing. You can obtain that, no doubt, if you ring Dr. Black, of Richmond."

This suggestion did not improve the situation, and indeed that had been no part of her intention in making it. Nothing could improve the situation, certainly not her final remark, reasonable as it was. "I would suggest that it is now your turn to consult a doctor."

He looked at her as if she had suggested he should take a dose of poison.

Somewhere a shutter moved in her mind, but it slid back into position before it revealed whatever it was she thought she had faintly glimpsed. Somewhere, all the same, it seemed to her that there must be an explanation.

The idea of leaving him never occurred to her. Everywhere husbands and wives were separating, getting divorced and generally reducing the stock of marriage, but Jessica had been too well brought up to rush after this fashion. Nevertheless, she was quite unable to believe that she could ever again live with Gerald as his wife, and her mind played with one all-pervading thought—how to make herself financially independent. Only so, she thought, could she bear to live under the same roof with him.

When she began to take stock of her capabilities, they seemed, she thought, very meagre, apart from her secretarial training and experience. There was also, of course, the Incorporated Phonographic Society's Diploma, which would obtain for her a teaching post in any first-class Commercial School in London or outside it, as well as private pupils. But an office would take her from home all day, and this would entail the services of a really dependable and capable woman in the house for at least some part of each day, which would make a distinct hole in her earnings. Nevertheless, for so long as she continued to live under her husband's roof, the care of his house and the preparation of his meals must be a first charge on her time and energy, unless she could find a capable deputy. Besides, there was Dinky. He could be left neither inside the house all day nor outside it.

This problem was still exercising her mind when Gerald emerged from his sulks and attempted to knock out the first

brick in the wall between them. It was his mother's birthday on the coming Sunday, he reminded Jessica, and, as usual, she must be bidden to lunch. This was a fixture and Jessica could not and, he knew, *would* not allow any cancellation of it. But, clearly, the atmosphere now existing between husband and wife must somehow be improved if the keen-eyed and keen-eared Simone was not to see that something was amiss between them. To this matter Gerald addressed himself, since he felt quite certain that Jessica would not.

It would not be true to say that he apologised to Jessica for what he had said; indeed it is highly likely that he had forgotten what it was exactly he *had* said. But at least he murmured something about 'the unruly member', her own impetuosity and her habit of taking what he said too literally. He was disappointed, and so not so tactful, perhaps, as he should have been, and, for her part, she had seemed so detached about the whole matter, so unconcerned. She hadn't cared for that word. "Do you expect me to get hysterical?" she'd asked coldly. He was a stranger to her. She didn't want his apology, or whatever it was he thought he was offering her. She turned and went out of the room.

The situation remained at that stage for several days, while Jessica reflected that nothing he said or did could make her feel differently. There was no apology, no form of words, which could wipe out the portrait of the man who, after so many hurtful comments, had so calmly insulted her that morning. None of his excuses prevailed with her; his explanations were far from explaining—they did not even explain *away*. No husband worth the name—certainly no husband who professed affection (to put it no higher)—could have been guilty of such an insult as Jessica had received from Gerald, an evergreen in her memory. But he had, she was sure, not the faintest idea of the head and front of his offending.

Simone's birthday visit, however, passed off comfortably enough. Making a tremendous effort, Jessica managed to give an extremely convincing picture of a normal happy marriage, to which Simone contributed very considerably, not only

because she was so little given to maternal idolatry, but because she was fond of Jessica and approved of her as home-maker and housekeeper. Gerald, too, had obviously made an effort and, clearly, felt that the worst hurdles had already been taken.

But this, he soon found, was not so. Nothing, indeed, was clearer than that he had failed to restore normality in his home either by what he conceived to be his apology or by his assumption of it at the birthday visit, and he therefore resorted to tactics which had been applied so far only to lesser things.

One evening after dinner, as Jessica sat with a book by the thrown-up window, trying to forget the fatigue induced by the (to her) terrible heat even of the fast-dying day, Gerald looked across at her, smiling the smile which he always expected to get him what he wanted (and which frequently had done) and said, "I don't believe you really enjoy your solitary state."

"I find it cooler here, thank you."

He grinned at her.

"I meant at night—the mattress on that single bed is not any too comfortable, I think."

"I sleep very well on it," she told him.

"'But he only answered little liar!'" quoth Gerald.

No answer to this Bellocian retort.

"Well, if you still think the bed needs airing, suppose we take it in turns?"

To this she agreed, for she saw no reason, she said, why she should be the one who must continue to occupy the less comfortable bed, and Gerald was careful not to retort that she deserved to do so since she had instituted the change.

This improvement in their relationship, however, was more apparent than real, since Jessica continued to turn the key in the lock, whichever room she slept in—a state of affairs which endured for several weeks before Gerald made a fresh effort to heal the breach between them. Because she was amiable, if not forthcoming, because she left undone none of the things he had learned to expect, he made the mistake of thinking she was softening, that he had only to ignore the whole thing to have her fall into his arms again. He had no idea that he had become for her a different person, that for the present, at least,

she could not endure even the thought of him as a husband. He believed he had only to continue not to take her seriously, to treat the situation as though it did not exist, in order to render it actually non-existent.

Fate came to his aid, contriving that he should get a severe summer chill. Liking the hot weather mainly because he so hated the cold, Gerald constantly tempted Fate because he could so seldom be prevailed upon to take ordinary precautions. Never a good patient, he was upon this occasion more sorry for himself even than was usual when laid low; and Jessica, up and downstairs all day long, and frequently disturbed at night, and assaulted all the time by her enemy the heat, found her defences torn from her. By the time he was recovered they were on the threshold of the date fixed for his summer vacation, and with the freakish arid streak still persisting into September they deposited Dinky with Gerald's mother and betook themselves, as earlier arranged, into Devon. To Jessica, however, this seemed no better than the Thames Valley, for even though a little rain fell, the day temperatures were as unseasonably high as the nights were cool.

From no point of view could the holiday be considered a success, for although it had perforce to restore the normal sleeping arrangements, any hopes Gerald might have entertained of this ally putting an end to the physical estrangement between them were short-lived. With the best will in the world to do at least her duty as a wife, she found that her body entirely refused its office. It remained quiescent, indifferent, as if Gerald's wounding remark had forever killed desire in her. As chief culprit for this state of affairs she brought to the bar the persistent fatigue which Gerald's recent illness had induced in her—and for which the pitiless heat did nothing. When the weather cooled down, when they were home again, and had picked up the threads of everyday existence, then, surely, she thought, life would return to normal.

But this did not happen.

It was during this period that Emma first began to wonder if Jessica's marriage was quite as successful as she and Sid had

always believed it to be. The family meetings, so far as visits from Jessica and Gerald together were concerned, were no longer very frequent, and although Jessica always made reasonable excuses for Gerald's absence, Emma was not entirely reassured. She considered her daughter looked much too pale, and, for all she talked brightly enough of things that she knew it would interest her mother to hear about, Emma sensed a change in her which she could not put into words. But she knew that, whatever was wrong, Jessica would never say anything about it, and if she had dared to suggest it she would tell her gently not to be 'silly' or 'fanciful'. Had Emma but known it, what she missed was that essential gaiety which Jessica had always sported like a feather in her cap, for the absence of which her bright talk, the interest she took in her parents' affairs and those of their circle of acquaintances, or her pithy comments upon Ethie's latest 'affair', did not make up.

But more than at any other time, it was when Gerald and Jessica went over together to see them that Emma knew herself perturbed. She was used to what she called 'Gerald's nonsense', with his odd phrases and his references to Jessica as 'My poor wife' and the rubbish about her Welsh blood, but she was entirely unprepared for Jessica's sudden riposte to the former phrase—'My wife, poor wretch!' and for all her voice was devoid of resentment, the phrase caused Emma to glance sharply at her.

"You have a well-read daughter," Gerald unsmilingly informed her, and introduced her to Samuel Pepys and his *Diary*, from which, he told her, this pleasantry was taken. At this Emma looked relieved, for she and Sid had long been used to having scraps of books they had not read, and never would read, thrown at them; for from her schooldays Jessica had unloaded not a few upon them—a good many from Dickens, some of which she and Sid had found as amusing as she could have desired. Particularly Sid, perhaps, who had a fund of telling phrases of his own, not all culled from English literature, it was true, though he was on cordial terms with Mr. Micawber's efforts, those of Barkis and Mrs. Gummidge and of Mr. Podsnap and the Foreign Gentleman. Mr. Pepys, however,

was a stranger at Number Six and not, Jessica perceived, smiled upon there at the moment. And certainly not, as she saw, by her mother, for whom indeed he wore a sinister aspect. "‘Poor wretch,’ indeed! I’d ‘poor wretch’ him!’"

"Funny chap, Gerald," Sid commented later to Emma. "D’you think he makes our girl ‘appy?"

For once Emma did not appear to notice the dropped aspirate. She said, "I don’t think she’s very happy at the moment, Sid."

"What they want is a coupla nice youngsters," said that gentleman.

It would be amusing, he thought, to be a grandfather at fifty-two. But Emma was thinking her own thoughts. Since the good Lord had taken back the son He had given her, she had hoped He would send her a grandson. But Jessica had been married for four and a half years and neither she nor Gerald ever spoke of children. And Ethie, though she was always ‘running about’ with young men, was as far from marriage as ever.

"I didn’t think she looked very well," Emma said. "Did you?"

"Oh, I don’t know. Bit pale, p’raps."

"And much too thin. She used to say it was the war food. But it can’t be that now. And she’s not as . . . gay . . . as she used to be. It used to be so easy to make Jess laugh. I can’t remember her laughing once the whole time she was here to-day. Of course she hasn’t liked this heat—it never did suit her."

"Don’t you think that fellow treats her right?"

"There’s something—I don’t know what. But Jess will never say."

"I shouldn’t worry. Probably only a lovers’ quarrel."

"Jess isn’t the sort that quarrels and carries over—she says what she thinks and it’s done with. Besides, it isn’t only Jess who’s different. Gerald is, too. He’s not the same person who used to come here after that office trouble. Remember? We liked him so much then—more than Jess did, you know."

"Jess was sore, didn’t like his interfering."

"If we hadn't welcomed him he'd have stopped coming, for he got no encouragement from Jess. In a way, you know, Sid, we made that match."

"Well, we both liked the chap, Em!—and you're not telling me she married him to oblige us?"

"No, of course not. But it's what I say—if we hadn't thought him so marvellous, tackling that tiresome man and his letters, he'd have given up. I don't believe Jess had ever thought of him, or any other man, for that matter, in that way at all."

"Now, Em, it ain't no good going on like that, worrying yourself to death. Reg'lar Mrs. Gummidge you are—straight! And worry never did nothing for nobody. Jess can look after herself. I reckon she can tell Gerald where he gets off, if you ask me. Put out the light and come to bed."

During the late autumn of that year Jessica contracted a bad throat which, after the best part of a week, forced her to stay in bed, which meant that she was feeling extremely ill. Gerald, used to Jessica's good health, did not take kindly to a wife laid by, and since a couple of days in bed did not seem to have achieved any improvement in her state, he announced his intention on the way home of asking Dr. Mavin to look in upon her. "And he'd better come this evening after his consulting hours, I suppose. If we make it the morning, and the girl has gone before he arrives he'll not be able to get in."

Ill as she felt, Jessica did not want a doctor, but being completely unable to utter a word could make no protest. But at least Dr. Mavin was no stranger—he had attended Gerald for a stubborn cold soon after their marriage, and he had seemed to her very like Dr. Hamilton, the old family practitioner to whom she had been used as a girl. And since then she and Gerald had met him at several local affairs—a bazaar, a charity dance or two. So at least it wouldn't be like seeing a stranger.

This settled, after putting some lozenges by her side and something with which, as on previous days, she would make a few painful, ineffectual efforts to gargle, Gerald took his departure—very hurried, these days, since he must himself deal

with breakfast or go without. He had left a note requesting the girl to come earlier these mornings, but all the result this achieved was a pencilled line at the foot of the note to the effect that she was 'unable to oblige'.

Gerald's return that evening was so belated that Jessica found herself looking at the clock every few minutes and wondering if she could manage the short trip to the bathroom to refill her water-flask. She had arrived at the point when it seemed that her thirst was insupportable when she heard his key in the lock. But it seemed that he would never come upstairs, and she lay in a fever of thirst and impatience until at last the door opened.

Having refilled her glass, he stood without speaking for a moment, watching her painful efforts to swallow, then announced that it was not Dr. Mavin he had asked to call, but a Dr. Rowe, whose name was known to her only because she had seen his plate on the gate of one of the new houses in the Sheen Road. This was considerably out of Gerald's way in coming from the station, whereas he must pass Dr. Mavin's house on his normal route. However, no voice, no comment. But she pointed to the clock and mouthed the word 'late', and indeed Gerald was nearly forty minutes after his usual time.

"There were several people in front of me," he apologised. "And I wanted to have a chat with Dr. Rowe."

Jessica's heart gave a little jump. At last! she thought, at last he has done what I told him months ago he should do!

Without further comment Gerald went away to eat the cold food with which he had provided himself on the way home, leaving Jessica, as usual, quite unnecessarily sorry for him on this score and wishing he would stay in town for an early evening meal until she was about again.

When the doctor arrived he at once diagnosed her illness as an acute attack of laryngitis, and gave her instructions for painting her throat with something palely-golden in a small bottle which he put at her bedside, said she was a little run down and had a degree and a half of temperature. He wrote out a prescription which he suggested Gerald should leave to be made up at the chemist's to-morrow, and this he put beside the

bottle, and then began to talk of 'this little matter about which your husband had a word with me this evening.' It was, Jessica thought, just as well that she was unable to utter or she would have flayed Gerald where he stood, looking bland and self-satisfied, at the foot of her bed. But, forced to listen in silence, her indignation mounted, so that when the doctor put down a small box beside the bottle and the prescription and said, "Now, when your throat is better, just take these—twice a day—and we'll soon have you all right," she would willingly have slain them both. "But be sure you stay in bed until your temperature's normal," was his final word as he beamed upon her from the door, which Gerald stood holding open for him. "Silly old fool," she apostrophised him and thought bitterly, as she heard them chatting on the way downstairs, *Men!* they're a conspiracy! and turning her face into her pillow she wept. Recovering, she got out of bed and locked the door of her room. Later, when she could be sure that Gerald was safely asleep, she would get up, temperature or no temperature, and get whatever she needed, some warm milk, some fresh water.

The painting of her throat brought speedy relief, though to speak was still very painful, and to that extent (and no further) she took back her animadversions upon Dr. Rowe.

Two days later a note arrived by the first post for Gerald from his mother, asking him to come along the next day with Jessica for an evening meal. When he reached the office he telephoned her explaining, whereupon Simone announced that she would arrive that very afternoon to see Jessica. Knowing that this had all the force of a mandate from royalty, Gerald yet temporised by saying that Jessica ought not to be encouraged to talk, to which Simone said that she was quite capable of doing all the talking necessary, and as for getting Jessica out of bed to open the door, what nonsense! "I'll send that morning girl of yours a telegram telling her to put the kitchen-door key on the ledge in the coal-shed and leave the garden gate unbolted, and I'll let myself in!"

Jessica was feeling much better and able to talk again, she told her mother-in-law, whom she was very pleased to see.

"But why are you in this room, my child? Why not in your own bed?" that lady wanted to know, to which Jessica murmured that she hadn't wanted Gerald to catch any infection there might be.

"In that case it was Gerald's place, surely, to occupy the spare room?"

"It wasn't Gerald's fault—it was my own decision. And it's very pleasant here, you know, and as it's so warm I can have the window up at the bottom and get a good view of the garden."

"In which, at this time of the year, my child, there cannot be much to see."

"Yes, but it *is* unseasonably warm."

"Quite so. Just the sort of weather likely to give one chills. Gerald tells me you haven't been able to speak or eat."

"I have been able to do both for the last three days," she said with a smile. "I've been wanting very much to see you."

"I rather fancied you had. I felt there was something wrong when you entertained me so charmingly on my birthday visit. Now don't say 'There's nothing' because I shan't believe you. I don't think acting is among your many talents, my child."

Before this onslaught Jessica was silent for a few seconds, then she said, "May I ask you a very personal question?"

"Certainly."

"How many years were you married before Gerald was born?"

"Nearly nine."

"Nine years! Did you think you would never have a child?"

"I was quite sure I shouldn't. You see, I married a man who was a rheumatic, and rheumatism, as you may not know, is a great deterrent to the begetting of children. However, my husband was at last persuaded, after a very bad and crippling attack, to undergo a long term of special and, I may add, very expensive treatment, and for about a year was comparatively free from the scourge. During that period Gerald was born. But the condition soon deteriorated. It needed more strength of mind than he was capable of to continue the 'cure'—largely dietary—at home. And besides, his business took

him a great deal to France, where it was even more difficult."

Jessica said, "Gerald very much minds our not having a child. But he refuses to see a doctor."

"And you have?"

Jessica explained, and added, "I thought he would be glad to know that there was no reason why I couldn't do my part towards it, but he behaved as though I'd insulted him. He said—but never mind what he said—the point is that I went to a Harley Street gynaecologist after . . . after he said what he did . . . and her confirmation of the doctor's verdict only made matters worse. So now I've got a complete distaste for that side of married life. I suppose I mean as far as Gerald is concerned. That sounds dreadful, but I hope you know what I mean. Gerald, of course, doesn't realise that this is a psychological state—something I can't do a thing about. He just thinks (and believes) that despite the doctor and the gynaecologist there *is* something wrong with me."

And out came the account of Dr. Rowe and the tablets.

"If I could have spoken I'd have told him the facts, but of course I couldn't utter a word, which Gerald very well knew, but in case my voice should have returned to me during the day he found it wiser to pour his confidences into the ear of a doctor to whom we were strangers rather than into that of Dr. Mavin, whom we have got to know rather well and often meet. But he'd never have dared even that, if he hadn't been pretty sure I was effectually muzzled."

Simone laughed, and so, within a second or two, did Jessica. After so much fury and resentment laughter came to her as a liberation. For a few moments while their laughter ran about the room Jessica's situation seemed the very stuff of which laughter is made. She stood away from it, looked at it as if it concerned some other young woman and continued to find it supremely mirth-making.

"Really," said her mother-in-law at last, "Gerald is so much like his father it's ridiculous. I needn't ask if you've taken any of the tablets . . ." which nearly made Jessica start laughing again. "Not only my throat, but my fury," she said, "would have made that impossible."

"Is Dr. Rowe coming again?"

"No, he said not, unless we went for him, which meant if my throat didn't clear up. But his remedy worked like magic—which is rather a pity because there are quite a few things I should much like to say to him,"

"Well, Gerald seems to have been very clever and very silly. Do you want children very much, Jessie?"

"No, I don't think I do any longer, though I suppose I'd feel differently about it if Gerald would return the compliment I paid him and go to see a doctor. He seems to me not quite—sane—on the subject. I suppose he's afraid of what he might hear—I mean, knowing about his father and after the Army doctor's grading. . . . I believe he wants a child *just to prove he can have one*, because it makes him feel inferior not to have one. A kind of self-justification—not any real desire for a child as such."

After a little pause, Simone said, "You will remember my telling you, my child, that masculine vanity often goes deeper than ours. Well, this is an excellent example of it. I remember my doctor telling me as a young married woman that most men just take it for granted that on this matter it can't possibly be they who are at fault, and that they often react badly when proved wrong. He said, further, that for some reason women seem prone to believe that the fault lies with them and so never put it to the test, and often can't be persuaded to do so."

Jessica considered this for a few seconds, then said, "But it's true, isn't it, that both husband and wife may be perfectly normal and yet never have children?"

"Yes, indeed. I've known those who've arranged divorces and tried again with fresh partners—sometimes successfully, sometimes not."

"That piece of knowledge should be passed on to Gerald, I think, in case he doesn't know it," said Jessica, not without bitterness. "Meantime, I wish I knew what, exactly, is going to happen to our marriage."

"You will probably recover in due course, my child, from what you call your 'psychological state', and then things will

come right again. Meantime, I'm sure you'd like a cup of tea—and some fresh water."

To this cheerful view of her situation Jessica made no reply.

CHAPTER TWO

DURING the next few weeks Jessica found that her marriage was quietly re-establishing itself. The chief factor in this unexpected *dénouement* was her realisation that, although he would never say so, Gerald was more than a little ashamed of himself, and that she, by her quiet, undemonstrative re-assumption of her household duties, and her detached impersonal attitude, which defied all his efforts to break down, had created an atmosphere which he could scarcely endure, which reduced him to silence. She saw that he was profoundly unhappy, but she did not know what to say to him any more than she could take the first step towards breaking their marriage.

If he would have made the initial effort, she would, she thought, have been able to discuss it quite calmly, for she had stopped feeling angry—one could not nurse one's anger, or one's humiliation for ever, and she had not been bred to believe that marriage could be as easily disposed of as a garment of which you had grown tired, nor was she in the least affected by the knowledge that this was a view not shared by many thousands of wives up and down post-war England. But she knew, as the days went by, that he would never say he was sorry or that he hadn't meant what he said; and indeed she felt that he had not remembered *what* he had said. Later she was to come to know that he found no difficulty in forgetting what he did not wish to remember, so far, at least, as his own conduct was concerned. "I did that," says my memory. "I could not have done that," says my pride. That apophthegm, which she had garnered from the war-time translation of Nietzsche's

Beyond Good and Evil, seemed to sum up the situation, and exactly to describe the state of mind of one who must always be on good terms with himself. Unfortunately, she reflected, my own memory is less amenable. It won't give way to my pride.

But since she was not going to leave her husband she must behave as though she had not made this discovery about him. All the same, she did not find it easy to forget what he had said, though she did eventually contrive not to remember it all the time. That Gerald was unhappy was, at least, a bridge, and her determination to find herself a job gave her sufficient courage to walk over it. Upon one thing she was determined: she would not be financially dependent upon her husband; but this point she did not intend to discuss with him. She meant to do no more than say that she did not find enough to do in the house to occupy her all day. Gerald would have no objection to her earning money; of that, at least, she was sure.

Nor did he. And at the moment he would have been satisfied to have her back as his wife on any terms.

One day towards the end of November a letter arrived for her addressed to her by her maiden name at Thelma Road, which her mother had slipped into another envelope and correctly addressed. To her surprise the letter was from James Elton, managing director of the publishing house which had embarked upon the ill-timed experiment of *Woman's Review* in the spring of nineteen-fourteen. He said that he had a proposition to put before her and would be glad if she would have lunch with him on some day suitable to herself in the coming week. She replied at once, announced her marriage and suggested alternative dates for the appointment.

"What do you suppose the proposition is?" Gerald asked. "Is it likely they're resuscitating their high-brow woman's magazine, and if so, and they offer you a job on it, would you take it?"

"Would you mind if I did?"

"No—we could arrange things here, I expect."

She was grateful to Gerald for harbouring none of the usual prejudices of husbands against their wives' earning money; and

even more for his complete unawareness of the very real necessity she felt of being no longer financially dependent upon him. Maybe the labourer (even in the home) was worthy of his hire, but the thought held no measure of reassurance for her. Nor did she really look forward to leaving her home every day of the week, even if she was able to find the sort of woman she needed to take charge; but this was no deterrent to her determination to achieve her financial independence.

However, upon keeping her appointment with James Elton, she found that there was no intention at the moment of resuscitating the *Review*—the time was not considered propitious. What they had in mind, said Mr. Elton, was to give fresh life to a monthly magazine which didn't aim so high and which had suffered during the war. They hoped to be able to use it as a stepping-stone to the *Review*, but that remained to be seen.

"Our present intention is to make it a magazine in which intelligent women can be interested. We are overhauling the whole make-up, introducing one or two new features, of general interest to women, and have already secured the serial rights of Mr. Blank's new novel. In addition, I want reviews of new books. And it's these I thought you might care to have a shot at. It was one of the features, you remember, which you thought we might extend in the *Review*, but the times were against us. How do you feel about it?"

Jessica said, "Very thrilled," and they both laughed, and settled down to details.

This pleasant interview sent Jessica home with a lighter heart than she had carried about for some considerable time. Apart from all else, she was considerably set up by the fact that James Elton had remembered her and the suggestion she had put forward tentatively during her brief term at the *Review*. It compensated her for the sense of personal failure with which she had lived through the past three months and, better perhaps than all else, would achieve for her that measure of independence which she still felt to be essential to the continuance of her life with Gerald.

"All right, of course," he said now, "if the paper catches on.

I'd have thought, though, that there were enough women's papers already," to which Jessica rejoined, "Well, let us look on the bright side and suppose that it will survive."

It was shortly after this that Gerald gave her a puppy, a little tottering black object of six weeks, whose pedigree parents had dismayed and angered their owners by arranging their own nuptials and producing two offspring, one of either sex. Having, as dog-breeders, no more use for the first-cross than for the mongrel, the two pretty creatures would have been summarily dispatched from the world but for the interest taken in them by a neighbour, the local stationmaster, himself a breeder, and also a lover, of dogs. He was quite sure, he said, that some of his 'gentlemen' (by which expression he meant his 'regulars' by the eight-fifteen and the rest) would be interested, and he accordingly carried the pair of them about in his pocket when seeing the early evening trains in and out, and speedily found a good home for the dog. Two days later, seeing a pair of bright eyes fixed upon him as he gave up his ticket, Gerald stopped and was promptly put in possession of the situation, and on a sudden impulse bought the little creature—as a peace-offering?—for Jessica.

On the way home, however, he was beset by misgivings—not because of any doubt of Jessica's reception of the puppy, or because it was feminine gender, but because he'd clean forgotten about her cat, the hoity-toity semi-Persian, now full-grown and, though of neuter gender, very much the Gentleman in the Parlour, whose attitude to dogs was shown by the speed with which he hurled himself down the garden path if a passing member of the tribe happened to show as much as an inquiring whisker at the gate left accidentally ajar. Never having shared a home with any domestic animal until Jess's Dinky appeared upon the scene, Gerald knew very little about the creatures and was ready to accept Dinky's behaviour as corroborative of the common belief that cat and dog were natural enemies.

But Jessica, hampered by no such belief, received Bess with the utmost enthusiasm, and was much impressed by Gerald's account of how he had put her down when more than halfway

up the lane, to see if she would follow him; but instead she had at once turned and began to hurry back the way she had come.

"Intelligent creature!" said Jessica. "All she understood was that she was being taken away from someone who had loved her . . . and who were *you*, please, anyway?"

Not in the least deterred by Dinky's arched back and bad language, she performed the introduction, then sat down on the rug beside him, holding the puppy safely against her neck, but stroking Dinky's head and carrying on with him the kind of conversation to which he had been accustomed since his arrival when no older than the puppy. It was, however, a one-sided conversation this evening, for the Gentleman in the Parlour, though he had ceased to make his most ungentlemanly remarks, could not be persuaded to produce a single purr.

The puppy, though puzzled, was nonetheless very comfortable against the warm swathes of Jessica's hair, but when Dinky stalked to the door and waited majestically to be allowed to take his evening stroll without more ado, Jessica put the puppy down and went into the kitchen to dish up the evening meal, prepare some bread-and-milk for the new member of the household and leave Dinky's supper in its customary place on the draining-board, with the little window by the sink open, as usual, so that he could come and have it when he chose. But he had not chosen by the time supper was over and Jess had cleared away and done the washing-up. Looking out, she saw him sitting in his favourite place on the top of the coal-shed, over which a small-leaved Virginia creeper had been trained, and beneath which, in summer-time, he could (and frequently did) entirely efface himself. But this evening he sat bolt upright, very much monarch of all he surveyed, a territory which he shared with no dog! Unperturbed, Jessica left him alone and carried in the coffee. If he wanted to sleep out of the house for once, it wouldn't hurt him, for it was May, and though at its beginning it had been almost as chilly as April had been that year, and with trees as bare, it was now unusually warm, and Jessica was already a little concerned to think that the summer might prove as hot as its immediate predecessor.

Dinky, however, had no intention of going hungry or of

doing anything, it seemed, save taking the air, and when Jessica began to make tracks for bed she found him sitting, as usual, beside his empty plate, attending to odds and ends of toilet. He purred with his usual zest when she stroked his head and paid him compliments, and when, with a certain degree of anxiety in his voice, Gerald inquired what the position was, she said, "Very good. Another week and there won't be any 'position', only two very happy companions."

"A bit optimistic, aren't you?" Gerald commented, but Jessica said only, "Wait and see."

The next morning, up betimes, Jessica carried down the puppy, who had spent a blissful night beside her bed in a basket in which Dinky had slept as a kitten, and *en route* for the garden she opened the door of the dining-room, where he now slept, leaving him, as usual, to follow when he chose. Carrying the puppy into the garden, she put her down on the diminutive lawn and herself walked slowly across it to the little apple tree, now in its pink and white spring dress. Turning her head, she saw that the puppy was ambling after her and that Master Dinky, from his leafy perch, sat regarding the performance with sublime detachment.

Walking slowly back to the house, Jessica reached up and fluffed up the ruff around his neck.

"You need grooming, my lad," she said to him.

"I can do all the grooming I need, thank you," Dinky said to her.

Maybe, maybe not, she assured him, but certainly for the next few days he should be left to deal with the job, for this was not the moment to subject him to a service he always thoroughly resented. She turned away, called to the puppy, "Bess . . . Bessie. . . . Come along," and walked on to the kitchen, turning at the door to see what was happening. But there was only the puppy continuing her waddling but determined journey to the house and Dinky on his perch, aloof and unconcerned, pretending there was no puppy. When Jessica took out a saucer of milk to him, he yawned and moved disdainfully to the other side of the shed, turning his back on mistress, interloper and garden.

Picking up the puppy Jessica hurried into the kitchen, closed the door and prepared warm bread and milk, which she poured into an enamel bowl stamped CAT and put down for her; then got back to the morning ritual of preparing breakfast and making sure that Gerald was getting up.

Dinky maintained his proud aloofness for several days, then accepted the puppy with a dignity which defied you to remember that he had ever done anything else. Soon they slept in the same chair, ate their meals together out of enamel bowls (both still stamped CAT) placed side by side on the kitchen floor, and never once in their long life together were ever anything but the best of friends, and, for Jessica, amusing and delightful companions.

But for Bess, Jessica, from the beginning, was the centre of her universe.

During the first weeks of the New Year Jessica's life took on a pattern it was to retain for many years to come, for the new magazine flourished and her Notes on New Books became a very popular feature. Since the arrival of Mrs. Black, who had taken the place of the girl who had decided she did not want to work every morning, she had mapped out her day with the thoroughness with which Mr. Wells's Mr. Lewisham had worked out his 'Schema' for the years that lay between him and his B.A. degree 'with Hons. in all subjects'. But whereas Mr. Lewisham at that time had only himself to bother about and his mind firmly fixed on Greatness and the belief that 'Knowledge is Power', Jessica had to wrestle with the by now familiar business of getting a husband out of the house in time to catch the eight-fifteen, seeing that all due provision was made for Mrs. Black's lunch and for her own evening meal with Gerald. This done, Bess had to be walked across the Common into the Park (which was as much to her own liking and benefit as to Bess's) and for the rest of the morning she settled down, with Bess at her feet, to the business of reading, reading, reading. After lunch some fresh air in the garden and a little exercise for Bess with a ball, with which she was very clever and amusing, and then back to the job. When Gerald arrived 'work' was out

of sight. After the meal she would read certain pages in Gerald's *Times* and glance at the day's news in the evening paper. In the summer they walked in the Park, in the winter or in bad weather there was the wireless, the new wonder Gerald had installed in its infancy, or the gramophone, not yet regarded as a back number.

If, sometimes, she grew a little weary of her task, she nevertheless applied herself to it conscientiously, and was rewarded by making acquaintance with the work of new writers and of some outstandingly interesting books from the pen of established ones. Nevertheless, there was no sort of doubt about its being a job, and one which, such was her integrity, could only be done at all if it were done thoroughly. High-browism or literary criticism she considered to be outside the scope of her task, and, she would have told you, of her capacities. But she possessed the ability to give an idea of what a book, fiction or non-fiction, was about, without spoiling the interest for the reader; and, at the same time, to write entertainingly. Moreover, she was blessed with very keen eyesight and could read for hours on end without feeling the strain.

She was by no means unaware that Gerald frequently used what he called her 'Work' (with a capital letter) to accept evening social engagements *solus*; and she gave no hint of her knowledge that he even did this without disclosing to her the fact that they had both been invited. There were but few occasions when she regretted her absence, and, luckily, she did not now mind being left alone in the house after dark any more than she had done during the war. For she was of the company that can bear its own society, and the parties of the 'twenties were legion. It was as if people everywhere had to make up for the rigours of the war years, as if, could they but be gay enough often enough, they might even forget there had ever been a war. Nobody seemed minded to notice how uneasy was the Peace, or the assumption of power in Munich of a certain Hitler who had roused crowds in Munich to demonstration against the parlous condition of Germany, and claimed to rule not only Bavaria but all Germany; or the Berlin food riots and

the collapse of the German mark. Nor the rise of Mussolini in Italy. The war was over. Let joy be unconfined. . . .

Gerald had long since decided that Bess had been a good investment, even though he would call her, not without a shade of annoyance in his voice, a 'one-person' dog. This was not entirely true, though it was a fact that, not unnaturally, she regarded Jessica as the one person who really mattered in her life. She was a clever and intelligent little creature, accepting every caller at the house when it was clear that Jessica did; but when she walked with her mistress in the Park she would espy a stranger long before Jessica had caught sight of him, and would stand perfectly still, every muscle tensed, growling to herself, never taking her eyes off him. Small dog though she was, most strangers seemed to consider it the better part of valour to make a slight detour, which entirely satisfied Bess, who then went on her way, perfectly content. Sometimes, the nameless warned-off stranger would call out, "That's a fine dog!" or "That's the sort of dog to have!" and when Jessica's neighbour told her she should not walk alone in the Park—that it had 'a bad name'—she would say, "With Bess I'm far from alone. I would walk anywhere with her."

A home, a devoted dog, an amusing cat, the wireless and a gramophone! Having supplied her with four out of five of these adjuncts to a happy life, Gerald obviously felt that he was free to go his own way. To those who commented upon Jessica's absence from the gaities at which he appeared he would say, "Jessica has her work, you know," and made the mistake of saying it once in Jessica's hearing. "Jessica has her work, you know." It was just so, she felt, that he would have said, in different circumstances, "Jessica has the children."

One evening about half-past nine, in the early June of 'twenty-five, when she sat alone reading, to the background of a gramophone recital, her attention was disturbed by the low growling of the little dog at her feet. She listened for a moment, then stopped the record in time to hear as distinctly as Bess must have heard the opening and shutting of the gate, the sound of footsteps approaching the front door. Bess was

already waiting to be let out of the room, and this done she dashed to the street door and began to bark. Before opening it Jessica stooped to hold her by the collar, and then "Good evening" said a voice she had known from her youth and not heard for a very long while. "I hope I'm not making a nuisance of myself, calling upon you at this hour?"

"Drury!" exclaimed Jessica. "Drury Hamilton! Do come in!" Releasing Bess, she straightened up, gave the usual password—"May come"—to Bess, who thereupon stopped barking and made no objection to Drury's entry or to his extended hand of greeting, but stood at her mistress's side, waiting to be introduced. "And this is Bess," Jessica told him, whereupon Drury said, "Good dog, Bess!" the short tail was politely thumped in recognition of the greeting and Jessica led the way into the sitting-room, the french window of which stood wide to the little garden, over which hung a full moon, making it as light as day.

"I must apologise for calling at this late hour," Drury said, "but you did say I might look in upon you if I found myself in the neighbourhood, and this is the first time I have."

"Was I as grudging as all that? I *think* I said that I *hoped* you would look in upon us when you were in the neighbourhood. And I'm very glad you have, for I was just beginning to be a little tired of my own company, for once. I'm afraid you won't see Gerald—he has an evening engagement."

Drury did not look as though he found the thought utterly desolating, as he said, "Don't you mind being alone at this time of day?"

"I'm used to it," she was about to say, but altered it to the usual, "I'm never really alone—I have Bess. She's an excellent companion. Let us get a breath of fresh air, if possible, shall we?"

They walked through the wide-open door to the garden and found themselves in a world of magic. Bess was at their heels and Dinky, sitting erect on his favourite perch, gazed benignly down upon them, purring loudly when his mistress caressed him, and was spoken to respectfully by Drury. When they

passed on he jumped down and skimmed along the ground at their side, running round in circles, his usual dignity nowhere at all. Reaching the gate, he leapt upon it, then with one bound sprang into the sycamore tree, climbed out of reach and sat motionless, two bright eyes in a bunch of fur.

"Silly Dinky!" his mistress apostrophised him, laughing. "You're moonstruck, my poppet! These are the nights," she said to Drury, "when I believe in witches, and in cats as their 'familiars'. On all other kinds of night Dinky is the quintessence of dignity and superiority."

"Why 'Dinky'?" Drury wanted to know.

"Why not? Dinky's an old-fashioned word for 'trim', 'neat', 'attractive'. Very suitable, don't you think?"

Drury did.

Bess had watched these cat-capers, as always, with a certain amount of concern, leaning her front paws against the trunk of the tree and looking inquiringly among the branches, making odd little whines the while and looking from tree to mistress, as if she felt she should do something about it.

"No good, Bess," Jessica told her. "He's just showing off. Come along, let's leave him!"

She turned to walk back, but Drury said, "Just a moment. I think this gate would be better with the bolt shot. I know few women who would sit alone so late in a house with the house doors wide open, the garden gate merely latched, and the light full on! Aren't you ever nervous?"

"No—but everyone seems to think I should be. And it never seems with Summer Time to be really dark before my bedtime. Gerald constantly reproves me for not bolting the gate, but then, Gerald would be terrified of staying alone after dusk in a house, even if ablaze with lights and bolted and barred like a prison. But I must do him the credit of saying that he admits it."

She was conscious that Drury was looking at her as if, as she mentally phrased it, he was doing a sum in mental arithmetic, and she said, "I suppose it's all a question of temperament. I should hate to be shut in far more than I'm afraid of . . . whatever it is I'm supposed to be in danger of. That's the

word, isn't it? I never say, as it seems I should, 'I'm here alone. Supposing . . .?' "

"It's just as well to take ordinary precautions," Drury suggested.

"But anyone who wanted could pull back that bolt easily enough."

"Yes, a padlock would be better. Tell Gerald to fix one. Do you spend a lot of evenings alone?"

"No, I think that would be an exaggeration. I could, more often than not, go with Gerald if I chose, but I like my own company, and during the war got used to it. And I'm not very much of a party-goer. I don't like to drink so much and I don't know the new language, and even less do I like getting to bed in the small hours. So Gerald makes my excuses."

"Where is the party to-night?"

"In Chelsea. At Linda's, I believe."

"Linda's! If that young woman's giving a party on her own, then she *must* be bored! Peter's in Paris over some Exhibition or other. I thought she was to go with him. But very likely I've got the date all wrong. I'm usually only listening with half an ear when Linda's doings are mentioned."

"But would she leave the baby?"

"Annabel can hardly be regarded as a baby any longer. She's nearly six, and the Claydons are so wealthy that a child makes very little difference to their way of life."

"Their house is very lovely. Too lovely to give parties in."

"They aren't given there often, you know, but in the studio. Bohemian parties, doubtless, are not very good for expensive carpets and furniture. The house I find too large, but it has, I understand, many literary associations. By the way, I must tell you that my father thinks it a fine feather in your cap that you should get occasional book reviews and articles in the *Evening Gazette*."

"I have a very good agent," Jessica said.

"You're very modest. I hope you don't overwork. To my professional eye you look a little tired."

"It's the hot weather. It came so suddenly. No spring, with

March like January. A sunless April and then, overnight, summer arrives in May. I find it rather debilitating though most people seem to thrive on it. So I'm probably a freak."

"Much more probably you shouldn't live in the Thames Valley, lovely though it is. When do you go away?"

"Not until late August, and I'm afraid we go south. I feel the Yorkshire moors or the north-east or even east coast would suit me better. But Gerald, like a lot of other people, seems to think the east coast is cold."

"He probably means 'bracing'. It's the dry side in the summer, of course. And much better for *you*, I'm sure."

"Well, I may get down to the farm for a week afterwards—that always does me good. But not unless Gerald can go to his mother's, and she, unfortunately, has not been very well lately and is without a maid."

"I hope you don't have to take a pile of books away with you?"

"It all depends on the date. If we go well after copy has been delivered I have to, of course. If not, I take no more than I should take in any case—enough to guard against wet days and provide for lazy ones."

"But surely I'm not mistaken in thinking that I've often read an editorial footnote to the effect that Mr. or Miss X is on holiday, etc., etc."

"No, of course you're not; it's very frequently—usually—done, I think. But it never occurred to me to make such an arrangement, and for some reason Gerald thinks it would be a mistake to do it now, though I can't think why. He seems very anxious I shouldn't endanger my job. I suppose because he knows how pleased I was to have it offered to me."

Drury looked at her for a few seconds without speaking, as if lost in thought, then, "I should feel inclined to raise the point," he told her. "It must be a burden *never* to be free of a job, to take it on holiday with you. Even from the point of keeping fresh, a break is certainly desirable."

"I'm sure that is the sensible attitude," said Jessica. "I think I must adopt it. And now, can I get you a drink? Sherry? Cocktail? Or would you prefer coffee?"

"No, thank you. I had a cup of tea pressed upon me by the patient I came down to see for my father. Richmond's too far for him, these days, but the patient is as old, and doesn't want to make a change. My father's far from well and should retire, now that I'm back again. But I'm sure he never will. He'll die in harness."

The conversation ran easily along, but Time ran too, until, glancing at the clock, Drury said he must be off.

"I'm extremely glad to have seen you again," he said, adding, with a smile, "and to have an opportunity of telling you that you've grown thin, that you've lost some of your charming colour and that you're obviously working too hard."

Jessica was so surprised she was left speechless.

"I recommend a complete break in your job over your holiday, lots of milk, cream and butter in your diet—and early to bed."

Recovering, Jessica said, "But I'm perfectly well. I'm never ill."

"I'm not saying you're ill now, but you're burning the candle at both ends. And you live on your nerves. I hope you won't be waiting up to-night for that husband of yours?"

"No, I never do that, but he can't be very late because of the need to catch last buses. He will be sorry to have missed you."

As to that, Drury looked as if he had his own opinion.

She and Bess escorted him to the door, and as they stood there Drury said, "It's quiet enough here for the country. How lovely your pinks smell! But how do you keep the cats off them? It's more than we can do. They seem to think they're planted just to provide them with a soft sweet-scented bed."

"Dinky has been taught otherwise and seems to be able to keep off other members of his family. But Bess is the real explanation. Friendly as she is with her own cat, no other may show his nose. Good-bye—remember me please to your father and mother."

Drury got into the car, looked back at her, put the car into gear, and with a lift of his hand had gone.

She closed the door, shutting out the scent of the pinks and

feeling, for all the warmth of the evening, as if she had been for a walk in a high wind. She did not find it very easy to re-focus her attention on the book she had been reading, and soon put the volume aside, coaxed Dinky into the house, shut up doors and windows and went upstairs, meaning to go at once to bed.

It was half-past eleven, Summer Time, but despite open doors and window the house had not even begun to cool off. She was no longer aware of her fatigue, and she did not feel sleepy, but there was no sense in waiting up for Gerald, who was unlikely to be home before midnight, and anyway would not appreciate the attention. Upon the only occasion when she had been up upon his return—having stayed to write a last-minute notice of a book she had to include in copy due for posting on the morrow—he had, indeed, seemed to resent it.

His "Why aren't you in bed?" had no real note of concern at the sight of her still at work, but one, rather, of resentment, as if he thought she was 'marking him up', or, perhaps, making him feel a little 'guilty' for leaving her to her work while he went out on pleasure bent. But she was sure that was not a state likely to afflict Gerald, for since she did not care for the social round he so much liked, she saved him from feeling that he was in any way defrauding her; and as to his company, well, it was no part of Gerald's idea of marriage that husbands and wives should sit in each other's pockets, as he expressed it. Upon occasion she would enumerate the things in any one week which they had done together—a walk in the Park with Bess on this evening or on that, and on Saturday or Sunday afternoon; tea or supper at his mother's; a visit to the theatre on Richmond Green, or to the local cinema, which she never much enjoyed, for the local 'picture house' then was a ramshackle, badly-ventilated affair and the films not out of the top drawer. Still, as Gerald insisted, it 'counted' when she was 'checking up' (as, in fact, she was not) upon their life together.

Bewitched by the lovely night, her mind slid now away from the problems she knew her marriage would present if straightly looked at. It was no night for problems, for her room, with its

thrown-up windows, was flooded with moonlight, and putting her head out into the still and scented air she gazed upon a world of faëry rather than upon the little road in which she had lived for the past eight years. Despite the claims of Summer Time, of all its denizens she appeared to be the only one not yet in bed. Asleep or not, they lay behind their carefully drawn blinds and discreetly open upper windows. If magic was abroad to-night they recked nothing of it, nor cared. Their lives were circumspect and tidy, ruled by Time, the real clock-setter. And so, she told herself, will mine be to-morrow morning, but to-night, like Dinky, I'm moonstruck, out of both Time and Place. She was still out of it when a clock in the neighbourhood struck twelve, but she could not bring herself to put in her head, draw the curtains and turn on the light, for it was unthinkable that a world of moonlight could be annihilated by the turning down of a switch. So she collected her dressing-gown and went off to the bathroom to make her preparations for the night, and slipping into bed a few minutes later left the curtains undrawn, not choosing to remember that those who sleep in moonlight sleep not peacefully.

Sleep, however, at the moment was miles away. Wide-eyed, she lay relaxed against her pillows, the book at her side forgotten, gazing out upon the pageant of the summer night, making such sweet amends for the torrid day. She felt happy and at peace, as if she dwelt briefly in a world of faëry, where there were no problems, no doubts or regrets, and no disturbing sorties into the future; a world in which she was of Blake's company, *born to sweet delight*.

A quick, sharp bark from Bess in her basket outside the door, the sound of wheels grinding to a stop outside the open window and the click of the flag of a taxi-cab being reversed thrust her crudely back again into the world of actuality. The illuminated face of her watch told her that it was close upon two o'clock in the morning. Like the girl in one of Elizabeth's novels, Gerald had obviously 'missed everything everywhere', but had been fortunate enough to find a taxi.

Bess was now out of her basket and halfway down the stairs,

barking sharply, but either she quickly recognised the disturber of the peace or was reprimanded by Gerald, for she fell silent, and after a minute or two Jessica heard her settling herself down again in her basket with the familiar little grunt that at any other time would have made her smile, so like a comment was it upon the vagaries of the human race. But not this morning, for her sense of humour did not function when she was awakened out of her first sleep. And my last, she thought, since by the time Gerald got himself to bed she would be wide awake and beyond help.

But that was her last thought that night, for the house fell into silence and she into a deep sleep.

Gerald, she discovered in the morning, had elected to sleep in the spare room. This discovery almost moved her to take his breakfast up on a tray, but not quite; firstly, because it would almost certainly create a precedent, and secondly because she would not condone this sudden aggravation of a bad habit. To have reached home at two in the morning, and by taxi, argued a departure from Chelsea no earlier, certainly, than one o'clock, which she considered beyond all reason for someone who needed to be in his office by nine o'clock. But the morning after the night before was no time for saying so, and indeed there was no time for anything save getting Gerald out of the house in time to catch his train. Luckily he attempted neither explanation nor excuse and probably, she thought, did not feel equal to either.

That evening during their meal Jessica still made no comment upon this matter, but announced quietly that Drury Hamilton had looked in on his way home from visiting a patient at Richmond.

"He was sorry to miss you," she told him.

"What explanation did you give?"

"Of your absence? I said, of course, that you had an evening engagement."

"Did you tell him where?"

"It came out in the course of our conversation."

"What do you mean, 'came out'?"

"As far as I remember, I commented upon the fact that he hadn't himself gone to the party, since I understood that it was one of Linda's."

"Go on."

"That's all, except that he said Peter was in Paris and that Linda must be very bored to give a party on her own."

"I see. And what had it to do with Drury Hamilton where I was?"

"Nothing. But I couldn't pretend you were in the house."

"Why was he calling on you, anyway? Why this sudden renewal of interest?"

"I once said we should be pleased to see him if he ever found himself in our neighbourhood. It was when I acknowledged his letter of sympathy over Andy's death."

"This is the first I've heard of any such letter."

"It wasn't a letter, merely a note. I didn't show it to you because I thought you'd say it was a mistake to bring the subject up again."

"I should probably have thought so, but that's no reason why you should have made a secret of the letter. How many letters have you had since from him?"

"None."

"And how many previous visits?"

"I object to your cross-examination, but the answer is 'None'. It's more than six years since I saw Drury Hamilton, as you must know."

"Why should I know? You have the day to yourself—you can see whom you please."

"As you have the evening."

After a little pause, Gerald said, "And what about *your* evening? Was it a pleasant one?"

"It wasn't an 'evening'—it was three-quarters of an hour."

"But it *was* 'pleasant'?"

"Oh yes."

"And doubtless you were given a lot of good advice?"

"Not that I remember, save that we should padlock our garden gate after dark."

"Quite unnecessary if you'd be sensible enough to lock up

after dark instead of sitting with all the doors invitingly open."

"When the weather is so hot I can't shut myself up like that. I feel safe enough with Bess. How was Linda?"

"Linda? Oh, as always, charming to look at and delightful company."

"A large party?"

"On the contrary; hardly a party at all, just a small gathering of friends."

"You were terribly late."

"A hold-up on the Tube. I got to Hammersmith to find the last bus gone."

"But it was two o'clock when you reached home. The last bus leaves Hammersmith long before one in the morning."

"What are you getting at?"

"I'm merely reminding you that it doesn't take an hour to get here from Hammersmith, even by bus. A taxi would do it, at that time of night, in about twenty minutes."

"Taxis aren't easily come by after midnight. I walked a considerable distance before I picked one up."

Jessica considered this statement for a moment, then said that she thought he should go to bed. "You look very much in need of some sleep. It seems very unwise, to me, to stay anywhere so late as to risk having to walk home. If you use the spare room I shouldn't wake you up."

"We aren't going to start all that nonsense of separate rooms again, are we, for heaven's sake?"

"You re-started it, not I, last night."

"Solely out of consideration for you."

"Perhaps the consideration might have started a little earlier in the evening. As it was, your taxi woke me."

"Friend Drury kept you up late, perhaps?"

"No—he went well before ten, but it was too hot to go to bed so early."

"The same argument applies to to-night," said Gerald, and clamped on the ear-phones, thus making further interchange of remarks impossible. So Jessica went on with her reading until the book fell from her hand, when she rose, called to Bess, and

went out to the usual summer-night business of luring Dinky into the house. By the time this was done, it was nearly eleven o'clock, and as it looked as though Gerald was settled in his chair for the night, she went upstairs to bed.

The evening after the night before, she thought, as she drew the curtains across the window, in no mood to-night for the moonlight. She undressed quickly and got into bed.

There was something wrong with that scrap of conversation, she told herself, if she could sort it out. Clearly, Gerald had been disturbed not by Drury's call but by her report of their conversation, so far as it concerned his whereabouts, though he had quickly pulled himself together and disguised the fact by a conventional display of husbandly jealousy. When she had asked after Linda he had certainly been taken aback, despite the fact that he had told her that it was she who was giving the party.

Well, what did it matter?—with Gerald, one excuse was as good as another, for an evening out. She was much more disconcerted by the evening they had just passed together, since it reminded her of something she tried to forget—that they had been married for well over eight years and no longer had anything that mattered to say to each other. Odd to remember that once they could walk half round Richmond Park without running short of themes for conversation.

CHAPTER THREE

IN the days that immediately followed, Jessica recognised afresh a state in her affairs with which she was very well acquainted—that nothing was ever as bad as it seemed, that all the heart-searching and despair which she had taken to bed with her, and all the private miseries, disappointments and the rest with which Gerald had smothered an evening, had disappeared.

On the very morning after the evening which had followed

upon his return with the milk, Jessica had saluted a return, if not to normal, at least to that halfway house so familiar to her. Always a hurried and rather silent meal, breakfast was no less so this morning; nor was there any marked lack of appetite on Gerald's part. As usual, he glanced casually at his letters, pushed them aside and stuffed them down into his pocket when he rose from the table and went into the hall, where he collected hat, gloves and stick, accorded her the usual parting kiss, was seen off by her as was their invariable custom with the usual raised hand of farewell upon his part and a wave of the hands on hers. Last evening might never have occurred, and she could have saved herself the despair over her marriage which had kept her awake into the small hours. Nothing was ever as bad or as hopeless as it seemed at the time.

Nevertheless, as she washed up and made beds and presently, upon the arrival of Mrs. Black, took Bess for her morning walk in the Park, she did not deceive herself into believing that what had happened had not happened and would not happen again. The more she thought of it the more certain she became that as a marriage partner Gerald was a hopeless proposition. He did not run well in harness, and she could not believe that it was entirely because they were ill-matched, completely different kinds of people. He accepted none of the implications of the married state and never would. He was just not the stuff from which husbands are made, and that she had long known. Nor did he really appreciate intelligence in a wife. He had, in fact, not very much respect for wives at all, even when they were self-supporting, but only for mothers. Not that she believed that had she presented him with two or three children their marriage would have been any the more successful. He would blithely have gone his own way and left her to her 'proper' job. And if, as she suspected, he sometimes had an uneasy conscience about her, it was of brief duration, for he had never forgotten or forgiven her anger over his one-sided attitude to this business of parenthood. He had reckoned without her knowledge, had expected her to bow her head in disgrace and humility, like some childless wife in the Old Testament, and lo! she had neatly turned the tables on him. Quite obviously it

had been the very last thing he had expected, and he would hold it for ever against her. She was aware now not only that he was vain and selfish, but that he could be cruel.

She had travelled a long way since that day when, over their first lunch together, it had amused him to present to her the unpopular view of the war, and had found her so apt a pupil—a role she was never again to sustain. But she often wished she could put Time back much farther than that occasion—all the way to the actual beginning of the association, when she had first met him at Linda's birthday party, and disliked him so much.

Walking Bess in the Park, that morning which followed upon his return in the early hours of the morning, she realised that already her curiosity was ebbing. His attitude to Drury Hamilton's surprise visit, though deliberately provocative, she now dismissed as sheer bad temper. Somewhere, somehow, something had gone wrong with *his* evening, so why should *she* have had pleasure from hers? Was that it? But of one thing she felt assured—wherever Gerald had spent his evening it had not been at a party at Linda's house or at her husband's studio. That much she had learned by her conventional inquiry after Linda and Gerald's hurriedly covered-up surprise. But what did it matter *whose* party he was at, since all parties were the same party and grew one out of the other, *ad infinitum*?

Nevertheless, as the days passed, she was conscious of something about Gerald which puzzled her. He was amiable but withdrawn, seeming at times not to hear what she said when she spoke to him, as if, she thought, he had something on his mind. But at least he had not repeated what she thought of as the 'milk train' journey home—perhaps because, of late, the cocktail or sherry party seemed to have taken the place of the dressier and later-evening affair.

Towards the end of the month, however, the death of Simone Harwood put an end for a while to these social occasions. For although she had been ill for some time, her death, when it came, was sudden. The last time Jessica had been in to see her she had said, "My life, my child, is finished. I'm nearly seventy-two and I've had my innings. Now tell me about yourself . . ."

But although she had told Gerald this he had not taken it very seriously. Seventy-two was no age at all, he said; but that, Jessica knew, was because he would not let either, old age or death come as near to him as all that. Only to mention the word 'death' was to feel its cold buffeting billows tossing him up and down. From this simulacrum of grief he soon emerged, however, to deal in a thoroughly businesslike fashion with the settling of Simone's estate, and to be able completely to hide his dismay at the fact that she had left her house and furniture jointly to himself and Jessica. For these represented by far the most valuable of his mother's assets, the house being of the size most sought-after in this new servantless era, in good repair and in an excellent, 'much sought-after position near river and Park,' as the house agents were soon to describe it. So why not live in it? Jessica asked, for she considered that they held the tenancy of their present house upon a very uncertain basis, even though the house had changed hands several times without their having been disturbed as tenants. But this state of affairs, she felt, could not go on for ever. Sooner or later the house would be bought by someone who wanted it for his own occupation, and that he could obtain possession was to Jessica a veritable Sword of Damocles over her head. So now it seemed little short of insanity to let this little house off Richmond Hill pass out of their hands. Moreover, as part-owner, she felt Gerald had no moral, any more than he had legal, right to dispose of it in this arbitrary and summary manner.

"Why not live in it?" she pressed him, "and be our own landlords and immune from Rent Act and landlord alike?"

To this reasonable suggestion Gerald said that nothing would induce him to live in a house in which both of his parents had died—his father being practically bed-ridden for the last two years of his life.

"I hate the house," he declared. "It's full of illness, old age and death."

This was a state of mind which Jessica was quite unable to comprehend, for the house was attractive and bright, and unless you bought an entirely new house, in which no one had

ever lived, how could you be sure no one had ever been ill in it or died there? It was a morbid streak in Gerald that puzzled her exceedingly, and she was sure, as far as his determination to sell the house was concerned, it was not all the story. Gerald, she knew, would like to live 'farther in'—at Chelsea, Kensington, perhaps, though where he would find a reasonably-priced or rented house in either district, she couldn't imagine. But, more than all this, Gerald wanted the hard cash Simone's house would fetch, and she knew that he resented the fact that he must halve it with her. Too late, she realised that Simone, in sharing it between them, had meant to prevent Gerald from selling. She did not know, poor darling, thought Jessica, what a fool I can be—how difficult I've always found it to face the fact that to withstand Gerald, especially where money is concerned, is to be involved in an angry scene.

The sale accomplished, however, Jessica endeavoured to hearten herself by remembering her possession of fifteen hundred pounds, the first sole sum of money she had ever possessed. With it she opened a bank account in her own name and fed it with her monthly book article cheque and the proceeds accruing from any other work which came her way, instead of, as heretofore, paying them into the joint account she had with Gerald. This house incident had deepened in her the feeling that he was not only extravagant but alarmingly casual with money, and now that the opportunity presented itself to harvest a little, she was determined to take it.

This, she was aware, annoyed Gerald very much, but it couldn't be helped, and as she continued to allocate a regular and substantial proportion of her earnings to the household expenses he could lay no case against her. The only difference was that she drew her own cheques and knew what she was spending and, anyway, in adjusting their joint account, had given Gerald no cause for complaint: indeed, common decency had forced him to acknowledge that she had been 'very generous'. It was the *spirit* of the thing, he affirmed, which hurt him. After all, he had made his account a joint affair at the time he was called up. "But you ~~knew~~," she told him, "that I wouldn't overdraw by a penny—I was much too scared

of my new responsibility.” All the same, he continued to talk sadly of ‘mutual trust’ and ‘affection’, and Jessica was rather painfully surprised to find how unmoved it left her.

Towards the middle of July she went down to the farm for a week, leaving Dinky to be looked after by Mrs. Black and a ‘catophile’ neighbour, and Bess with the devoted North, whom she had never forgotten, and to whom she paid occasional visits for ‘ratting’ purposes. The weather, after cooling down somewhat at the end of June, with a little welcome rain, was now very hot again, and she was glad to be at Bourne, where such weather was less unbearable. And at Bourne, too, she began to feel alive once more. Everyone at the farm was pleased, for once, about the harvest and not disposed, at the moment, to worry unduly about the repeal of the Corn Production Act, which menaced the farmer’s security, for the Bonds had not dissipated their wartime earnings in what her grandfather called ‘those high jinks’ of some of their neighbours, and for the same reason had been able to stand up to the bad harvest of ‘twenty-two—a calamity for farmers all over the country.

Jessica’s namesake, now approaching her ninth birthday, had grown into a charming, equable little person, much devoted to Andrew, the brother who had appeared upon the scene two years ago, and been named after Jessica’s dead brother, though called ‘Drew’. Mary was self-possessed and friendly and Jessica had wondered why Gerald, who hankered so much after a child, had never taken much notice of her, but she had long since decided that he was not really fond of children (he’d spoil a girl and be over-severe with a boy). It was his vanity which was hurt by their childlessness. To the small Mary, it was clear, her ‘Uncle Gerald’ was just someone who turned up occasionally at the farm and presently went away again. But it was a long time now since he had put in an appearance.

Jess was well enough aware that nowadays her grandparents and uncles thought of him as a ‘queer’ chap; but they seemed neither to like nor dislike him. They had done their best,

during the war, to make him feel at home when he'd spent a few hours' leave at the farm; but his visits, they had reported, were brief and infrequent, for he had always 'rushed off home to Jess', as they expressed it, when he had week-end leave. They had taken that as both natural and fitting, but nowadays Jess more often than not came alone—and that was not to be wondered at either, since her visits were made at such times as he would be at his office. Yet reasonable as all this was, a touch of criticism flavoured their talk of him among themselves; for at least, they thought, he could occasionally bring her down or come to fetch her home, or even spare them a few days of their summer vacation. And they remembered Andy's qualified acceptance of him—"all right, no doubt, but not as a husband for Jess." It was an opinion in which they had all come to share, though they thought it a pity they didn't have 'some youngsters, which might make a difference . . .' Only Jess's Aunt Kate knew the truth of that, and she kept quiet about it because Jess had exacted a promise of secrecy from her. But it had been Andy who had told Kate of Drury Hamilton, who'd known Jess since she was a child of seven, and been in love with her for years. But for some reason she'd turned him down flat. Girls were nuts.

Jessica travelled home by a train on the Friday which just missed landing her in London in the middle of the rush hour. As usual, she had sent Gerald word of this, and expected that, also as usual, he would come to King's Cross to meet her; but he was not to be seen, and after a short wait she got herself into a taxi and was driven to Waterloo, arriving there about the time Gerald was due. But here also she drew a blank and after letting one train go without her decided that something had gone wrong and to go straight home. At her station North was on the gate and from him she learnt that Gerald had not, to his knowledge, come down yet, and if he had, he had not, as he usually did, collected Bess. Having seen the train out and put a porter on the gate, with instructions to tell Gerald, if he arrived, that Jessica awaited him at the cottage, North conducted her there, where his wife insisted upon making her a

cup of tea and Bess nearly wagged her tail off in her delight. Chatting over the tea, and listening to the story of Bess's prowess at the rat hunt, Jessica found half an hour had slipped by. She would not, she said, wait any longer, and North went off to commandeer the taxi, if it was about. The days when it was the old cabby who waited outside the station, with his not-so-much younger mare between the shafts of the shabby 'growler', were gone, and Jessica was sorry. She had enjoyed being trundled up the gentle slope of the Lane, drenched on a summer evening with the scent of the limes, as if there was all the time in the world and she lived not on the fringe of London, but in the leafy countryside. The taxi bred no such illusions and, if it deigned to come, would whisk her home almost before she had got herself, her dog and her belongings comfortably bestowed. However, she was tired this evening and the sooner she got home the better.

When the taxi stopped outside the house she saw at once by the fast-shut windows that Gerald had not yet arrived, though why Mrs. Black, when she went, had shut the windows of the upstairs rooms she couldn't imagine. The place looked ready to withstand a siege, she thought, as she paid off the taxi and found her key. She hoped Gerald was not waiting for her at King's Cross, but if so it was very stupid of him, for he knew no one at the farm would have let her lose the train. *Ergo*, they had just missed each other, though how, she couldn't imagine, since she had been almost the last passenger off the platform, and even then had lingered a while.

She let herself into the house, gathered up some letters placed neatly together by Mrs. Black on the hall table, opened the downstairs windows and walked through into the garden, where Dinky so far forgot his dignity as to jump from his perch and utter a few most unusual and clearly welcoming *miaows*. Considerably flattered, Jessica picked him up, carried him into the kitchen and provided him with a saucer of milk. It was then that she noticed the note addressed to her in Mrs. Black's handwriting on the table, neatly folded over and safeguarded with the pound weight of the kitchen scales upon it, carefully arranged to leave exposed only the words 'For Mrs. Harwood'.

This she picked up and read through. Purged of its 'Blackisms', as to phrases and words, it was to the effect that yesterday morning Gerald had left a note asking her to be careful to shut *all* windows and doors as he would be rather late home. But as she saw this morning that the bed had not been slept in, she was 'locking all up' again to-day, to be on the safe side. She hoped nothing had gone wrong and that Jessica had had a pleasant holiday and felt the better for it, hoped to see her in the morning and was hers respec'fully, Janet Black.

Having read this missive through twice, Jessica put it back again beneath the weight. At least it cleared up the mystery of Gerald's non-appearance at King's Cross, since he had not had her letter, timed to reach him, at the latest, yesterday afternoon, and which, she saw now, was among those she had picked up from the hall table. But this was no explanation of his lateness this evening. Moreover, though Gerald was no letter-writer, it was unusual for him not to send her a brief note during such visits; and, cavalier as he was about many things, she could remember no occasion when he had not come to meet her upon her return. If he had been quite unable to get home, a telegram or a telephone call to the farm was not beyond the bounds of the possible. The whole situation was quite unaccountable.

She went upstairs, opened all the windows, turned on the bath geyser, unpacked her case and put away her belongings, then sat down in her bedroom to look through the post. Nothing for Gerald, save her own belated letter and, luckily, nothing among her own that required immediate attention.

Refreshed by her bath, and her morale raised a degree by a complete change of attire, she went downstairs again, saw that it was after eight o'clock, but decided she had no appetite and would give Gerald another half hour before doing anything about the evening meal beyond laying the table. As usual on these occasions, the main dish was to be an omelette, in view of which, as arranged, Mrs. Black had that morning brought new-laid eggs from her own fowls. Having fed Dinky and Bess, she picked up a book and a cushion and established herself upon the garden-seat, but soon retreated before the determined

onslaught of her sworn foes, the gnats. Followed by Bess, as mercilessly attacked as herself, she endeavoured to settle to her reading, but her mind would not do her bidding and she was glad to put it down when she heard the sound of the key in the lock of the front door. Gerald, at last!

She hurried out to meet him and beheld a Gerald she had never seen before. His hat was pushed to the back of his head, his walking-stick hung over his arm, his newspaper stuck beneath it, and his face the colour of putty. He did not look at her or remove his hat as he grunted something she did not catch, but could only suppose was a husbandly greeting, new style.

"Whatever's the matter?" she asked. "Are you ill?"

"No," he told her.

"Have you been waiting at King's Cross? I sent you word of my train, but found the letter here when I arrived. From a note left by Mrs. Black I gather you did not come home last night."

"No—and I shouldn't be here now if I hadn't to talk to you."

"I can't begin to imagine what my offence is, but need you stand there looking as if you expect to be hanged at dawn? Pull yourself together and come and sit down."

"It's too hot in the house."

"Not now, though it was when I arrived—Mrs. Black had taken no chances and the house was locked up like a gaol with all the steam heat on. There's the garden, but the gnats are in possession, I'm afraid."

"I can't say what I have to say in the garden. Come out into the Park."

"I'm afraid I'm too tired."

"Do what I ask, Jess."

Something in his voice and the dead-pan expression of his face, heightened by the hat still stuck at the back of his head, halted her in the very act of saying, "Then let's go to bed and talk there," and she said instead, "Very well," whereupon he came sufficiently back to normal to move in and out of the rooms, shutting doors and closing windows. What-

ever it was he had to say it needed solitude—and the dark.

Scenting a walk, Bess sat up on her hind legs and wagged her front paws to and fro, after her fashion when something was obviously afoot. Taking up her lead, Jessica clipped it to her collar. She felt suddenly frightened and knew that, whatever had gone wrong, she could expect no support from Gerald, since he was so obviously—much too obviously—concerned in it. Bess would be her stay and buckler. She would lick her face, her hand, come and sit up tight against her with all the dog's uncanny sense of something wrong. Always at the slightly raised voice, a certain note of irritation or impatience—in her own or Gerald's, or that of a visitor—she would be at her side on the instant. Now that she knew she was definitely to remain while the present threatening atmosphere persisted, she was satisfied, but on the alert. Not having to urge, "Take me! take me!" she was calm and watchful, in full possession of all her canine attributes.

In silence Gerald opened the front door, in silence they walked through the scented darkness to the end of the little road across the common to the gate leading from it into the Park. Here Jessica turned left along the wide path bordered on the wall side by tall trees standing like sentinels in the windless evening, beneath the darkening sky.

Thus far neither had spoken. The messages which she had been charged to deliver from the farm seemed inappropriate to a situation which, for all Gerald was making it unnecessarily dramatic, was obviously concerned with something that was of importance. To him. To her also? Somehow Gerald, who had never been very firmly attached to his in-laws or their abode, seemed now to be entirely cut loose from both. Idle to mention their kindly messages, her own enjoyment of her short holiday, the satisfactory harvest. Idle to do anything but wait for Gerald to get off his chest this 'something' he had come home only to tell her. It was so she thought of it—as something she was to be told, a *fait accompli*, not something they could discuss and decide about together.

But even out here Gerald was in no hurry to begin and the silence hung between them like something tangible. Since

Gerald seemed to have forgotten that he had brought her out here on purpose to say what he could only say out-of-doors and was so important it couldn't wait, she said rather wearily, "What is it you want to tell me? I'm too tired to walk far."

Gerald went on walking in silence, then stood suddenly still and said, "I want you to give me a divorce."

She repeated the word as if it was red-hot on her tongue and stood still. "A *divorce*?" and then, after what seemed a very long interval, "For what reason?"

"Adultery."

As if he feared she would run away from the ugly word, he put his hand on her arm. And an ugly word it was to her who had never for a moment lived in the post-war world which thought of divorce as something to which every married couple was entitled if things didn't work out as they expected, or if they shifted their febrile affections; and it struck her with the force of a blow. It was from that as much as from his unexpected touch that she moved away and went walking on. She had come this way so often with Bess that she knew there was no seat anywhere along the avenue and, tired as she was, she was sharply aware that she could not sit still and listen to this story Gerald had brought her into the Park to relate. Fatigue or not, motion had become a necessity, even though she was aware that Gerald never came into the Park when it was dark either because there was no moon or, as was the case to-night, a moon so young it had already gone to bed.

She said at last, "You know my views on divorce."

"Yes . . . quite out of date."

"How long has the . . . affair . . . been going on?"

"Does it matter?"

"Probably not, but I would rather know."

"Not very long. She was abroad until a few months ago."

"When did it start? Before—or since—her return?"

"Since."

"Would it be right to put the date as Friday, the fifth of June?"

"The date means nothing to me."

"It was the night you arrived home by taxi at two o'clock in the morning. Did it start then?"

"No, earlier."

"How much earlier?"

"I can't remember. Why should you remember the fifth of June especially?"

"Because of your late return, because there was a full moon, and because on the following evening you were very moody and wore what I thought was a guilty air. The latter I put down to your annoyance that I knew Linda's husband was away and that she must be giving a party on her own, which you had not thought to mention."

"And not by any means because Drury Hamilton paid you a visit?"

"Expecting to pay *us* a visit. But in any case, it's a friendship of yours, not ours, we are discussing. Is this woman anyone I've met?"

"No."

"Are you in love with her?"

"I suppose so. She's very attractive."

"And it's for no more than that that I'm to give you a divorce?"

"No. . . . No, it isn't. It's because she's going to have a child."

After a barely perceptible pause Jessica said, "Otherwise you'd not have bothered? The affair would have come to an end when you grew tired of it. Is that it?"

"Maybe. I don't know. But you must surely see that the child puts a very different complexion upon the matter."

"For you, yes. How old is this young woman, or hasn't she told you that?"

"I don't see what age has to do with it, but I believe she's about twenty-seven."

"And is she in love with you . . . or has she, too, just been 'having fun' and now wants you to make an honest woman of her?"

"Don't be so priggish."

"She may be mistaken—or she may merely be using the

oldest trick for catching a husband, like Hardy's Arabella Donn."

"She's not a village slut."

"But she knew you were married?"

"Of course—I'd often spoken of you."

"My wife, poor wretch!"

"You seem to find the situation amusing."

"On the contrary. But when a young woman embarks upon an affair with a man she knows to be married, why, if the results prove inconvenient, does she always expect the wife to get out of the way?"

"It is held by the Chinese, I believe, that if the mistress has children and the wife not, then the mistress is the true wife."

"I'm not interested in the views of the Chinese about women. Nor, I fancy, is the woman we will, for politeness' sake, call your 'mistress'. What she wants is to be married—even if the poor fool she has tricked is not in love with her."

"I haven't said I've been 'tricked' nor that I'm 'in love'."

"No, you said you 'supposed' you were in love. I didn't expect you to admit you'd been fooled. Few men would. But why do you suppose women start affairs with married men, except as a means of acquiring a husband? At twenty-seven, women who think it a fate worse than death to be unmarried at thirty are not overburdened with scruples."

"Can't you understand the difference the idea of a child makes to me?"

"Oh yes, easily. Your sexual vanity is restored as your virility is demonstrated. Love doesn't really come into it."

"I haven't thought much about love—the way you spell it with a capital letter."

"Nor do you know much about it—however you spell it. Love with you is an appetite, and feminine admiration the breath of life."

"I suppose you've been longing to say that to me for years, and never before found an opportunity? But you always knew too much about me. However, if you mean do I feel now as I did once about you, the answer's in the negative."

"It's also, I notice, in the past tense."

"Well, what's the use of pretending? It just hasn't worked out. If we'd had children, it might have done."

"I doubt it—children would have been a further complication. You were never cut out for a husband. And whose fault is it we never had children? Not mine, as I took the trouble to find out. Your sexual vanity wouldn't let you risk it. But that didn't prevent you from scattering the usual insinuations to the contrary. That is what poisoned our relationship, despite all my efforts to save it."

"How could I help what people assumed? It's what is usually believed in such cases."

"Only by the ill-informed, but I haven't forgotten your performance with a certain Dr. Rowe."

"You forget nothing, do you? Anyway, we know the truth about the business now. We were wrongly paired. We might have lived together all our lives and never had a child."

Jessica said quietly, "However you look at it our marriage was a mistake. I always felt it would be. I never wanted to marry you. But you didn't play fair. You manipulated a situation that was over and done with in order to get my parents' support. You posed as the strong man who had delivered their innocent and ignorant young daughter from the snare of the fowler, when you were perfectly well aware she'd never been within miles of it. I don't hold it against them—they were poor psychologists, but I've never quite forgiven you."

"One would think, to hear you, we'd never been happy together."

"I wouldn't put it as low as that. When we saw little of each other during the war and the question of children was in abeyance, but not love-making, we had some happy . . . reunions. It was the return of what we call peace that was so very fatal."

"Since our marriage has meant so little to you, a divorce should be singularly painless."

"If I had wanted a divorce, I'm sure I could have found evidence to my hand long before this—enough for the purpose, at least. But I don't happen to share the modern view about divorce."

"But you can't refuse me one now. We don't want our child to be illegitimate."

"Illegitimacy's only a word, concerned with titles and inheritances, and in any case it's one you should have thought of rather earlier."

In silence they walked back to the house and for a moment stood together at the gate.

"But you haven't given me an answer."

"You haven't yet formally deserted me. Don't you need to put it in writing? And all your personal belongings are still here. If you give me good notice as to when you can collect them I'll leave you the house to yourself."

"You couldn't pack them and have them sent on, if I give you an address?"

"I could not. Good night."

"Don't you want to know who the girl is?"

"No, thank you, not to-night. It will do when you write."

She opened the gate, walked up to the door and, without looking back, let herself and Bess into the house.

Not until he heard the unusual sound of the bolt shut home did he move on. For he knew she was not so much locking herself in as locking him out.

But he soon recovered. Jessica would do what he wanted. . . .

By the time he arrived at the station he was almost ready to award himself a medal for having put himself to the trouble of coming down to make a personal confession, when he could quite well have said what was necessary through the post. True, he still had a letter to write, but that was a mere formality.

CHAPTER FOUR

GERALD'S letter duly arrived (the sight of his familiar handwriting making Jessica feel a little sick), but was promptly returned, since she had no intention of sharing any of what she considered to be the obloquy of the failure of their marriage.

Phrases like 'faults on both sides', and suggestions that the question of separation or divorce had arisen before between them, nothing would induce her to accept, since all such would be untrue. She was agreeing to the divorce because Gerald wanted it and had provided her with abundant proof of the two offences the law recognised as unarguable grounds for such a petition—adultery and desertion. If Gerald fancied that he was going to be allowed to throw mud at her because his own face was dirty, he was very much mistaken.

The second letter came two days later. It was addressed from a block of Kensington flats, written on good notepaper with a printed heading and a telephone number at the top—clearly the address of the flat of her disposessor, at which Gerald had, presumably, now taken up his abode.

Enclosed with the formal letter was another announcing his intention of coming down to collect his personal belongings on the following Thursday, which was two days ahead, if she would give him the house to himself. He still had a key, which he would leave behind when he went. These letters she sent on to her solicitor, announcing her acceptance of the letter for the court, and asking him to say that the suggested date would be convenient and to confirm the leaving of the key. This done, she then arranged to go over to Fairhill to have tea with her mother, who, she learned with satisfaction, would be alone, Ethie having an early evening engagement for 'the pictures' with the cavalier of the moment, and so was unlikely to put in an appearance before Jessica left. This settled, she then booked herself a seat for a play she wished to see which would ensure her leaving before her father's return. She had no wish to spend the evening in the atmosphere her story, repeated to him, would produce.

Over their tea together she gave Emma her news, which, as she knew would be the case, made her very unhappy.

"Not," she said, "that your father and I haven't been very disappointed in Gerald—he's not the same young man who used to come here in the early days and whom we liked so much."

"He never was, you know," Jessica told her. "But Gerald is

an adept at 'presenting' himself. He was very well as a friend—he had knowledge of some things about which I was very ignorant—but I never thought of him as anything else, and when he mixed himself up in that stupid Bardell business I disliked him cordially."

"That was my fault."

"I can see why you and father were impressed. He isn't very scrupulous, you know, and can always make a situation look like what he wants it to look. I still don't know why I gave up the fight, but it wasn't easy once he'd been made free of my home. But I always felt he was not for me, as a husband."

"But when you got over your annoyance you always seemed happy together."

"Oh, he was well enough as a companion, who knew things I didn't and would talk about them, and especially of the European situation. That's how he liked me—as the Young Person seeking knowledge and talking much fine nonsense about my pet subject, history—not as the young woman who had a mind of her own and meant to use it. I never loved him, but for a time, I suppose, I was 'in love' with him, but that didn't last."

"Perhaps if you'd had children . . ."

"No. I should still have been what I am. But I owe you a confidence on that subject. I should have told you before, only I couldn't talk of it then without feeling angry. Now it no longer matters. It's odd but I seem quite to have come to the end of feeling angry or feeling anything else, where Gerald is concerned. I just despise him, and that seems to swallow up everything else. You will tell me I shouldn't despise anybody, and perhaps I shouldn't, but I do."

Emma accepted the 'confidence' now with a fair display, her daughter thought, of indignation and surprise; but she did not belong to the generation which treated this subject of sex and the getting of children with frankness, and the situation between Jessica and Gerald now unfolded to her was one which she never imagined. When she was a young married woman you either had children or you didn't. If it was God's will you did, if not, not—it was as simple as all

that. All the same, Emma thought, they often went to the wrong people.

Also, she still considered divorce a disgrace. "It seems dreadful," she said, but was inclined to think it was equally dreadful that Jess should be left, at her age, "*with* a husband and *no* husband," and was by no means concerned with the position of his partner in guilt—they knew what they were doing. But Jessica said, "I don't care very much, you know, for having a husband who has affairs with other women. And, although he was so timorous about it, Gerald always did want a child."

"And not you?"

Pause. Then, "Not since Gerald would be its father, though I didn't know that for a long while. However, he may now settle down to the business of being a 'good husband'."

She wasn't sure that she believed this; she wasn't sure that you could make any generalised statement about Gerald, at least not any that would be to his credit; but she was quite sure that she didn't want a husband who needed 'holding down', and that she had no talent for such a business.

Emma, at this point, said she didn't mind *what* happened to Gerald, it would serve him right if he'd now caught a tartar.

"What are you going to do, Jess?" she asked her. "You can't stay in that house alone, and with all the tittle-tattle there'll be about the divorce."

"I don't think it will bother me much—I know my immediate neighbours, of course, but we're not on intimate terms. The chief trouble is that I may at any moment be turned out of the house—it has changed hands several times since Gerald refused to buy it, and I live in constant fear that someone will eventually buy who will want it for his own occupation, and out I shall have to go."

"You can always come back here, you know."

"Yes, I know I can, but I'd rather not run away. Also, I should miss the Park and river—and so would Bess. Don't worry about me, *please*—I shall be all right."

Emma was silent for a few seconds, and Jessica looking at

her knew that it was of no use to tell her not to worry. She wouldn't be able to help it.

Jessica said, "If it's money you're concerned about, lovey, listen to me. I've a comfortable nest egg in the bank, thanks in the main to my kind mother-in-law's foresight. For the rest, unless I fall out of favour and lose my job, which doesn't seem likely at the moment, there's nothing to worry about. I've been independent of Gerald's salary for quite a while, you know, and have contributed my full share to our mutual expenses. If I lose this job I can find another."

"But isn't there something called 'alimony'?"

"There is, but I don't want it, and still less, I'm sure, does Gerald intend I shall get it. I'm certain he will not fail to inform the court that I earn an independent income. He wouldn't pay if he could get round it—but I shall take the wind out of his sails, anyway, by announcing that I'm not asking for it."

There was a little silence, then Emma said, "Do you know anything about *her*?"

"Nothing, except her name, and that she seems the kind of woman Gerald deserves."

"And what *is* her name? Jezebel?"

Jessica laughed, the first time for many days, chiefly because there had been nothing to laugh about, but also because if you laugh alone it is apt to have a hollow sound.

"No, it isn't Jezebel. I don't remember much about that lady, I'm afraid, except that she came to a sticky end, and painted her face. If that were all, no one to-day would look at her twice, much less want to throw her to the dogs."

"She did wicked things and encouraged others to do them," said Emma.

"The name's Bianca," said Jessica. "Bianca Midhurst."

"Bianca! What sort of a name is that?"

"It's in Shakespeare, and so, you know, is Jessica. She was the daughter of the Jew, Shylock, who hankered after his pound of flesh in lieu of his lost ducats."

"Well!" said Emma, "and I thought it such a pretty name!"

"So it is. Bianca, however, is out of a drawer nearer the

top—she was the daughter of a ‘gentleman of Padua’. And now, before I go, don’t you want to hear the news from the farm?”

Whether she did or not she listened quietly to Jessica’s report, and then tried to persuade her to await her father’s coming, despite the theatre ticket. But without success. Her father, she said, would be angry and quite in the mood to threaten to go over to Sheen and interrupt Gerald’s packing operations. And, glancing at the clock, she told herself that she should be on her way unless she wanted him to arrive before she had started.

And that was what happened.

“What, off already?” he exclaimed. “Haven’t seen you for weeks and here you are running off directly I put my key in the door.”

“I’m going to a theatre,” she excused herself, “and have to pick up my ticket early, as it was ordered over the phone and won’t be kept.”

“How’s Gerald?”

“All right. Mother has all the news and will retail it to you in due course.”

“And when do we see you again?”

“Not for a bit. I’m going to be rather busy. So—hail and farewell! for now.”

She kissed him and slipped her arms into the little silk coat that belonged to her suit, not because she really needed it, but to prevent herself from putting it on her lap in the bus and getting up and forgetting it; which she was apt to do, and most likely to do this evening, with her thoughts so very much elsewhere.

“That’s a fetching how-de-do, my girl,” said Sid; “mind how you go.”

She smiled, waved her hand at him and went away, Emma escorting her to the front door.

“Give him the farm news, Mother,” Jess said, “and leave Gerald and the divorce till later—until bedtime if you can. It’ll spoil his evening else. Besides; you may let out about Gerald’s being at the house to-night and we can’t risk a *fracas* in our respectable neighbourhood. I still have to live there.”

"All right," said Emma, "I'll do my best. Are you sure you're all right there alone? I don't like it, you know."

"I'm perfectly 'all right'—but, as I so often remind you, I'm *not* alone. I have Bess and Dinky, and Bess is not only a companion, she is a first-class house dog. To hear her bark when anyone comes past the house at night you'd think she was an Alsatian at least."

She kissed her mother and hurried away, thinking how strange it was that it should be Gerald who had given her a dog like Bess.

To Emma's very considerable relief Sid settled down with the evening paper, so that Jessica's visit was for a while forgotten. The war had not dimmed his interest in the international situation, though nowadays he found it more difficult to follow, and nothing like as easy as it used to be, either, to find his way about the map of Europe. Old names had disappeared and new odd-sounding ones been substituted, like Czechoslovakia and Jugoslavia. The arguments were now concerned less with the position of the major countries that had taken part in the war than about smaller ones which had become involved in it—most of which Sid had not until recently heard of: Latvia, Esthonia, Memel, and Upper Silesia, to say nothing of the territory they called the 'Polish Corridor'. Russia, which had fallen out of the war into revolution, was associated no longer with the Czar and his Grand Dukes but with Lenin, until his death (and heaven only knew who it was who'd taken his place!), and was generally called the Soviet Republic. The old Hungarian Empire had been broken up; Franz Josef was dead, the Kaiser had fled to Holland and someone called Stresemann was in power in Germany, which had gone bankrupt, anyhow. The name of Hitler still cropped up in the news and that of someone else of the same kidney in Italy called Mussolini. Quarrels abounded, and it looked as if this League of Nations would be kept busy for years to come. A nice how-de-do! But at any rate we'd got rid of the Labour Government and put the Tories back with a sound majority.

It was much later in the evening that Emma gave him the news of the collapse of Jessica's marriage. She had chosen her time carefully and so circumvented Sid's expected and immediate reaction, to betake himself to Sheen and 'teach that fine gentleman a thing or two.'

"You may as well go to bed," Emma told him, "for he'll have left long ago. And what good do you think you'd do Jess by giving her husband—for he's still that—a black eye? You can't fight a man like Gerald—even at school I don't suppose he ever had a fight in his life. I never thought he had much pluck, for all his talk."

"More's the pity. If someone had given 'im a good hiding when he was young 'e'd be not playing Jess this dirty trick now," Sid retorted, his aspirates flying before his indignation.

"Times have changed—no use our sitting here and pretending they haven't. Divorce and all that goes with it is accepted now, whether we approve or not."

"I know that, but it isn't just 'is wanting a divorce—it's all the rest. No good pretending, Em, so come off it—'e's been a right-down rotter as a husband. I've thought so for years, and though Jess would never talk I knew I was right."

"Well, you and I made that match, Sid, as we've said before. If we hadn't encouraged him, kept the door ajar for him, it would never have happened. Jess knew more about him than we did."

"Then I can't see why she married 'im. We didn't *force* it—we merely approved."

"I suppose, in our own fashion, we must have worn her down. But that we shall never know. I don't believe Jess knows herself. If you ask me, it was just reaction."

"And what d'you mean by that?"

"Well, from all the bother with that silly creature at the office—and all the extra, unnecessary fuss, as I see now, that Gerald made about it—Jess was out of love with herself. I think she thought it was her fault her employer behaved as he did—and I'm sure Gerald encouraged the idea, if he didn't actually put it into her head."

"What makes you think that, for goodness' sake?"

"Just something she once said to me. He'd suggested she made men *think* she was more interested in them than she was. That she talked too freely to people she hardly knew, if they showed an interest in books, for instance, as if their opinions were of importance."

"I don't see much wrong with that—do it myself, not about books, though."

"Yes, but you aren't a rather nice-looking young girl, talking to a man fifteen years older than yourself and liking the look of you—though I don't suppose that ever occurred to Jess. He was just her employer, friendly and interested in something that very much interested her. *He* knew what he was doing but I'm sure Jess didn't, until Gerald was good enough to tell her. And of course there was his unsatisfactory marriage."

"Well, I dunno—maybe you're right. But it's a long while now since I decided we were both deceived in Gerald."

"We were what Jess would call 'poor psychologists'."

"What's that mean—that we didn't know A from a bull's foot, I s'pose?"

Emma sighed.

"It's no use our repining," she said. "Jess will be all right."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Jess has character, and if you fancy this divorce or anything Gerald can do will break her heart, you can think again. She knows when a thing's finished, even if, of her own account, she wouldn't have walked away from it. If you want my opinion it's that we've worried too much about Jess ever since she went out into the world. She's not the first girl who married the wrong man—and she's got a lot of life left."

"Well!" said Sid, "I like that! *You* lecturing *me* on worrying! Why, you've been a fair old worry-guts all your life!"

"Yes, I know, but I'm finished with worrying about Jess from now on. If you ask me, Sid Bond, you and I have never known the sort of daughter we've got."

The next morning Jessica was awakened by the postman's knock, which, since she had not yet grown used to the fact that she had no longer to rise betimes in order to ensure that a

dilatory husband caught his train, still came to her like an imperious summons from the world of yesterday, announcing that she was late. So from sheer force of habit she hurried into a dressing-gown and ran downstairs, with Bess racing after her, to gather up the letters lying upon the mat, and to rescue another which had contrived to lodge between the mat and the door. This, she realised, must have been there when she had come in last night, though she had failed to notice it. For by the handwriting she knew it for the monthly demand for the rent, upon which, as usual, no stamp had been wasted, since it could be dropped through the letter-box. This she put aside to be stamped and re-addressed to Gerald, care of the solicitors acting for him in the divorce.

It never occurred to her to open it and write a cheque herself for the amount, not only because it was not one of the household expenses for which she had made herself responsible, but also because payment was not due until the first of the month, and Gerald had long ago taught her never to write a cheque until a debt was actually due. Of the other three letters two were personal and unimportant, and the third from her agent, asking her if, within the next few days, she would care to write another of the light articles which were just then a regular feature of a popular morning paper—a series to which she had several times contributed! This, she thought, was a good start to the day.

Towards the end of the week she received a note from Gerald telling her that enclosed with the rent demand she had sent on to him there had been a formal 'Notice to Quit' from the landlord, who now required the premises for his own occupation. "He will probably offer you alternative accommodation," wrote Gerald calmly, as if never before had the idea been mentioned between them, "but as I don't expect you will now require a six-roomed house, with garden, this will probably prove satisfactory to you."

Upon reading this, sudden anger boiled up so furiously in Jessica that the top of her skull seemed to be rising and falling. That Gerald should so coolly appraise a situation which she had for so long foreseen and he pooh-poohed was bad enough,

but his calm suggestion that 'now'—now that he was not there to be inconvenienced!—she could live in anything that could be dignified by the name of 'alternative accommodation' was altogether too much. He would, she felt, have disputed his liability for the rent had the lease not stood in his name; but she was sure that he had been eagerly looking forward to the date when it would expire, and he be free of his commitment, and this unexpected move of the landlord must have delighted him. All the same, she had no intention of leaving the house and accepting any offer of two rooms, with use of bath, in exchange, and if Gerald thought otherwise he could think again.

Throughout the business of feeding her pets, preparing her own breakfast, little of which she ate, and performing her usual morning tasks of washing up and bed-making, her anger still lived on within her. Nothing Gerald had ever done had made her feel like this: she was angrier now than she had been even at the time of his insulting attitude to the business of children. For now there was nothing to qualify her anger, since her affection for him was dead.

Not waiting, as usual, for Mrs. Black's arrival before taking Bess for her walk, she left the key where she knew it would be looked for, called to the little dog and hurried out of the house. Nothing but fast walking would kill the demons which rode her, and for a while it seemed as if she would need to walk for the rest of the day if it was to be done. She burned with fury, with the desire for revenge, and even with the idea of calling off the divorce, because it would be so satisfying to think of Gerald's fury and dismay at the resultant situation.

But anger—even righteous anger—is exhausting, and, suddenly denuded of strength, she sat down on the seat beneath the wide-spreading beech facing the Pen ponds. For a while Bess lay at her feet, but soon, her energy recovered, she rose, as if such a waste of a good morning was not to be borne, and quietly walked a few yards away, to return carrying a fine, fat stick, which she put down at her mistress's feet, looking up at her with her head inquiringly on one side and saying plainly, "It's a warm morning—I'd like a swim, please."

She could have gone swimming without the lure of her mistress's stick-throwing, but she would not while Jessica continued to sit there on the seat—nothing, not even the shining lure of the pond, would tempt her farther from her side than had been necessary to collect the stick. But now, as Jess rose, picked up the stick and ran down to the edge of the pond, she dashed after her, barking with delight, jumped into the water, retrieved the stick, put it down at her mistress's feet and waited for the move to be repeated.

Suddenly Jessica found that her anger had dropped from her, and as she played the familiar game with the little dog she wondered why it had ever so fiercely assailed her, so unnecessary and irrational did it now seem. For there had been nothing out of character in Gerald's letter; it was of a piece with everything else she knew of him. The leopard does not change its spots. How very satisfactory, she thought, for now Gerald was someone else's headache.

This reflection, together with a busy day, kept her mind from reverting to Gerald until the evening, when she went to the cupboard in the spare room to collect a pair of shoes she wanted to take in the morning to be mended. Drawing back the garments hanging on the centre rail, she was instantly reminded of him by the sight of a somewhat battered tin box which he had brought with him from Richmond at the time of their marriage. "Secrets of the prison-house?" she had inquired, and he had said, "Just a few papers," and henceforth she had always referred to it as the Family Deed Box. It was so she thought of it now when, as she pulled back the clothes hanging on the centre rail of the cupboard, it stood revealed, pushed well back into the corner. Gerald kept none of his clothes in this room and had, apparently, not thought of the box when he came to collect his belongings.

Then she saw that the padlock was unfastened and decided that he *had* thought of it and had probably taken from it whatever it was that he wanted—his insurance policy, maybe, or his will (made at the time he went to the war, in her favour—"To my dear Wife . . .") leaving her, as usual, to dispose of the rubbish and the box. So thinking, she carried it downstairs.

But directly she turned back the lid it was obvious that the contents had not been disturbed for a very long time, for a film of dust had settled over the topmost papers, the first of which, to her astonishment, she found to be her marriage certificate. This she put aside, reflecting that had she ever had occasion to produce it she would not have known where to look for it! Next from the box she lifted a batch of letters neatly tied together with stationers' tape, which proved to be those which Gerald had chosen to keep of the many she had written to him whilst he was in camp. These were not for reading, but she scanned them quickly to see if the one in which she had recorded her visit to Dr. Black was among them, and finding that it was, retrieved it and threw out the rest. A much bulkier batch of correspondence, folded across to accommodate it to the compass of the box, was now revealed, and at once she recognised the long thick blue envelopes which had belonged to her days at Freeman's Court. Straightening them out, she saw that the top ones were all addressed to her, and beyond all doubt were those which her mother had passed over to Gerald to deal with after his first unheralded appearance at Thelma Road. Affixed to the back of each envelope was a careful copy, in Gerald's clear script, of the reply he had sent to each letter.

Releasing the red tape which bound them, she slipped the letters out from the envelopes and glanced at them, but as of old the ill-formed hieroglyphics defeated her, though here and there despair and pleading stood out from the page like beacons, the utter emptiness of life without her, the talk of suicide, the impassioned plea for her return on any terms—hollow echoes from a world so remote and unreal that she could not visualise it, much less read through the letters which came from it. But Gerald's replies, written in his clear script, she read through with the utmost care, though fury sat in her heart the while. For it seemed to her as she read that there was no justice in a world which for so long had withheld them from her, since they more than justified all the anger she had felt over Gerald's interference, and she knew that, had they been available to her at the time, no power on earth would have

persuaded her to meet him again, much less be drawn into the new lease of friendship which, so incredibly as it now seemed, had led to marriage. My intuitions, she thought sadly, and not for the first time, are always right. If only I hadn't always dismissed them as mere silliness, but had acted upon them, how much happier I should have been!

Collecting a waste-paper basket, she sat for what seemed an eternity tearing up this impossible correspondence between two grown men. It took some time, for the stationery was of excellent pre-war quality, but at last it was done, and carrying the basket into the kitchen she tipped the contents into the boiler. At first it seemed that even the fire refused them, for it sulked and looked like to die upon her, but determined that they should burn, she collected the bellows and roused the flames, which were soon licking at the parchment-like stationery it had once made her so angry to see lying, like a threat, upon her breakfast tray.

And at last the job was done. Nothing but charred, feathery fragments remained of a correspondence written out of such fantastic misery on the one hand and bland assurance on the other. Only then did she add her marriage certificate to the heap. Applying a match, she watched it fall, like the letters, into nothingness.

Picking up the empty tin box, she opened the kitchen door and set it down by the dustbin for the Council's men to carry away on their next visit.

CHAPTER FIVE

DURING the next week Jessica did not feel as if anything of importance had happened to her. She had spent, during her marriage, so much time alone that the days were much as before, and it was difficult to believe not so much that Gerald had quitted the house as that he had ever been in it, so little

mark had he left upon it. His clothes were gone, his shoes no longer sat in their trees at the bottom of the wardrobe, and the smell of tobacco had vanished from the house. What else had gone? Only her need to run up and downstairs, as she prepared breakfast, to make sure that Gerald was stirring, the need to have the evening meal ready to put on the table directly he came in. And the charm? That was one of the things she did *not* miss: it so seldom came into the house with him. It was turned off at the gate. And at the gate the curtain was rung down, for at home there was no audience; no one who had to be impressed.

The interview with the solicitor had been brisk and business-like. The divorce, she was assured, would be automatic, and Jessica had left his office feeling that getting divorced was as easy as getting married—and that both should be much more difficult, especially marriage.

I ought to be feeling humiliated and miserable, Jessica told herself; at any rate most wives in my position would be. But that wasn't in the least how she felt. There had even been a moment when she had thought, "I need never again go to or give a party unless I really wish to."

The only person, apart from her parents, who had her confidence was Mrs. Black, the soul of discretion. As she had told her mother, she knew neither of her immediate neighbours intimately. They belonged to that section of society which believed in keeping themselves to themselves; wishing each other good morning or good evening and taking in parcels which might arrive to find them not at home, and one of them, a cat-lover, would feed Dinky on the rare occasions of her absence for a few days. If they noticed Gerald's absence they would do no more than inquire if he were ill, and probably not that. They were aware that Jessica 'wrote', and was busy, and that no more than they themselves was she given to gossiping. When the case was heard they would probably see it in the evening paper, but that would not very much trouble her. Doubtless some of them would say, "That's what comes of married women having jobs instead of children," but that, too, would leave her withers unwrung. She felt nothing save that

something which should never have been undertaken was being cancelled.

It was upon the evening of a very warm day about a week after the visit to the solicitor that she was surprised by another visit from Drury Hamilton. When she opened the door and invited him to come in, he said that he was on the way to see his father's elderly patient at Richmond, and had knocked to see if she would care to accompany him. "I've plenty of time, and we can go through the Park," he told her, "and stop to give Bess her evening run. You look pale—some fresh air will do you good."

She thought so, too, and went quickly through the house shutting down windows and locking the doors to the garden, then ran upstairs to collect a hat. "And bring a wrap," Drury called. "The heat may cool off, and you don't want a chill."

They took the road running beneath the high wall of the Park to the Sheen Gate, and from thence made a slow tour of the Park before leaving the car parked near the Ponds, heading Bess away from them, and strolling across the grass.

It was a lovely evening, with a sky of deepening azure in which fleecy clouds of white hung motionless and towards which the trees seemed to be stretching their arms, like pagan priests, in supplication. For a little rain, perhaps, thought Jessica, who still did not flourish in the heat and found this dry August of high temperatures a major trial, even though it kept her mind off things she had turned out of it, but which stayed alert on the threshold, intent on creeping back.

They walked in silence for a few moments, then Drury said, "I've only just heard about the divorce. If I'd known I should have come sooner. Is it all in train? Please believe me when I say the question is not prompted by mere curiosity."

Jessica said that she did and that the divorce was going ahead. She felt very sorry that the evening had to be spoiled by even a reference to it, which Drury sensed, for he said, "Will you forgive me if I tell you something I think you should know?"

"Of course."

"Then may I ask you a question first? Do you want this divorce? Or were you badgered into giving way?"

"Do you think I can be 'badgered'?"

"Not generally, I think. So may I ask you another question, or the same question put another way? Would you have brought the suit against Gerald?"

"No, but I'm behind the times, I'm afraid, where divorce is concerned. Even although I think my marriage was a mistake."

"It's Gerald who wants to end it?"

"Yes, because, so he told me, the affair has had an unexpected result."

"So I've heard. It's about that I want to say something, if I may. Did it surprise you to hear it?"

"Yes, very much." She hesitated, then added, "You see, we had lived together for over eight years without having a child."

There was a little pause, then Drury said, "The young woman in the case, I understand from Linda, was a very recent newcomer to her set, and did not stay very long. She seems to have been something of an outsider—perhaps I mean gate-crasher. I'm not up in these terms. I understand she has what are called 'good connections' and a handsome allowance from a wealthy and indulgent father, with a flat of her own in town."

"She sounds very much up Gerald's street."

"Yes—I fancy she may be finding it fortunate that he also thought so."

"You are very cryptic."

"I was afraid you'd think so. How much of the situation did you get from Gerald?"

"Just the usual thing, I suppose. An attraction, an affair, an inconvenient result. The request for a divorce."

"No talk of love?"

"We both mentioned it but didn't do much with it. He found her attractive. That was about all. Maybe that 'o-day passes for love."

"Did he tell you when it began?"

"Not very exactly. But certainly recently—after her return, I gathered, from a holiday abroad."

"Spain, it seems. Not, it is suggested, alone."

"You mean . . . No, I'm afraid I'm very dense—I don't know what you mean."

"There seems to be some reason to believe that the child is not Gerald's."

"But how can you possibly know that?"

"This is where I have, like Agag, to tread delicately. I *don't* know, but quite accidentally, at a luncheon I had to attend towards the end of May, I overheard a scrap of conversation at the cocktail preliminaries between two men, who had had a couple, I fancy, standing behind me. At that time it meant nothing to me—I didn't know the speakers or the people they were talking about. Much of it went over my head, but one of them said, 'Oh, he's gone back to S.A., where, if you ask me, he intends to stay.' Whereupon his companion said, 'Then she'd better get him to alter his mind pronto—old Midhurst won't stand for his girl being left to hold the baby.' I imagined this was no more than the usual figure of speech, and I moved away."

To this Jessica said nothing, being more than a little mystified, and Drury went on, "Then the other evening Linda came over to dinner. We hadn't seen her for some time, and she gave us all the gossip, as usual, including the information (news to us!) that you were divorcing Gerald. My mother (who has no use at all for that young man, and has never ceased to be thankful that Linda didn't marry him), asked for particulars, whereupon Linda said, 'Oh, the usual thing—an affair with another woman. Someone called Midhurst. Bianca Midhurst.'

"My mother said, 'I don't seem to have heard of that young woman before. Should I have done?' Whereupon Linda said no, she was a newcomer. Someone had brought her along one evening when Gerald happened to be there, and it had been clear, even to the one-eyed, that he was very attracted. Linda, we gathered, was not. She said she understood Miss Midhurst had been holiday-making in Spain, but added that it didn't seem to have done much for her, though she'd collected an enviable tan. We were left to assume that

the young woman was not exactly bubbling over with the party spirit."

Still Jessica said nothing, and Drury went on,

"I don't, as a rule, take much interest in Linda's gossip, but all this made me sit up. After all, the surname of Midhurst is not a very usual one, and here was I hearing it twice within a very short time—to say nothing of its being coupled with the equally uncommon 'Bianca'. So I weighed in to see what I could find out. Had Miss Midhurst gone to Spain with a party? I inquired, and talked about the currency in what I hoped was a convincing manner, but Linda was equally vague about both. She knew nothing and cared less about the currency, and not much more, it seemed, about Miss M. She wasn't really in her set. Good-looking? Oh, in a heavy sort of way, she supposed. Dark, with round eyes—the kind of face Peter would call 'dull', with no 'drawing'. Of course she'd heard of the rapid friendship with Gerald and had been a bit worried because of you, and so had very carefully not asked her to any of her subsequent parties. But she supposed Gerald must have been going to her flat. No, she didn't know when the affair started, but she was sure Gerald hadn't met her *before* that evening at her party—that is, not until after the return from Spain.

"From which she got back—when?" I asked, as casually as I could, but Linda said, 'What *is* all this?' and why was I so interested? to which Euan, of course, said, 'Need you ask?'—all of which held us up a bit."

"And when was this party at which Miss Midhurst first appeared upon the scene?" Jessica asked, quite refusing the path of dalliance Drury had offered.

"Luckily Linda could tell us that, because it happened to be the evening of the day when Peter went off to Paris to superintend the hanging of his pictures at some exhibition due to open there at the beginning of June. It was the first Friday in June—the evening, you may remember, when I looked in upon you on my way back from Richmond. She says she had collected a scratch cocktail party over the phone because she was feeling a bit 'low'. She doesn't remember who it was who brought Miss Midhurst, but is quite certain whom she left

with—Gerald—and that it became a habit thereafter until Miss Midhurst was no longer *persona grata*.”

Jessica made no comment, and Drury continued, “I then asked if she was certain about the divorce, because nothing I knew of you had given me the impression that you were the sort of young woman who would rush into the Divorce Court just because her husband had made a fool of himself over some other woman. Whereupon Linda said it was a great deal more than that. Bianca was going to have a baby. And that did rather seem as far as I could get at the moment. I have since learned that Midhurst was recently knighted, and is something in the City, and that Mistress Bianca is the apple of his eye, which would seem to bear out the opinion of my unknown indiscretionists at the lunch.”

At this point Drury looked at his watch and said they ought to be strolling back towards the car, and, as they turned, Jessica said, “What an extraordinary business! In my little backwater I seem to have been living in a world all my own, where coincidences of that sort don’t happen.”

It was as they left the Park that Drury asked her if she had accepted Gerald’s story.

“Oh yes,” she told him, “he was quite clearly speaking the truth—or what he believed to be the truth, and hating to have to do it. He was in what my grandmother calls a ‘rare taking.’ ”

“But it looks, don’t you think, as if his account of things is not, in fact, true? At the end of May my two gossips knew, at least, that Miss Midhurst was going to have a child and seemed also to know who was the father, that he had gone abroad and that there was likely to be a shindy if he wasn’t back in time to do the right thing. About the same time Gerald meets the young woman and barely two months later asks for a divorce on account of the baby.”

Jessica said, “It certainly *looks* as if he was being deceived. But I’m sure he thought he was speaking the truth. When I asked him if he was ‘in love’, he said he ‘supposed so’, and then we got rather personal, I’m afraid. But I’m quite sure it was entirely because of the child he wanted a *divorce*. Gerald, you know, always wanted to have a child—at least, he wanted to

know that he could, though he never found enough courage to risk being told he couldn't, or that it was unlikely."

"Did it cause trouble between you?"

"Perhaps it wouldn't have done if I hadn't rashly taken the risk myself—or if I hadn't escaped satisfactorily."

"I see."

"It was, of course, the last thing he'd expected—or wanted. It put the onus on to him, and he couldn't face it. So he—he just pretended I had never done it. I didn't take that at all well, I'm afraid. And now, I think, he feels he has justified himself. If it wasn't my fault, neither was it his—we were just a wrong pair. Very satisfactory. He was most anxious to get the divorce started, so that the child should not be illegitimate."

"He'll find that a little difficult to prevent, nonetheless, if my suspicions are correct. Do you know that a child born of unmarried parents is not legitimised by the mere fact of their regularising matters between them after its birth? They must be in a position to marry at the *time* of the birth. It's astonishing how few people know that."

"Yes, I do know it. I had occasion once to look it up for an article I was writing."

"Do you think Gerald knows it?"

"If not, I expect someone will tell him before he's through."

"Well, here we are," said Drury, pulling into the kerb. "I expect you think I've been bothering you with a lot of things I'd have done better to have kept to myself."

"Oh no, I would always rather know the truth than not."

"Then, I'll leave you to think it all over while I have a short session with the patient."

With Bess's head upon her knee Jessica sat in the quiet tree-lined road upon which the dark was fast falling, and let her mind drift idly over this new aspect of a situation with which she thought she had already done. What Drury had told her did not seem, however, to make any difference whatsoever to it, notwithstanding that it might very well be true. So far as the woman's story was concerned, apart from the odd circumstance by which Drury had come first to hear of it, there was

nothing unusual about it; the dodge was as old as Time and would easily deceive Gerald, since in this particular he was a predestined victim. He had, in fact, been told precisely what he had wanted for many years to hear. For all it forced him to acknowledge his wrongdoing, it had nonetheless, she was sure, healed the gash she had unwittingly made so long ago in his self-esteem, and nerved him to make his confession to her, buttressed by his determination to browbeat her, if necessary, into giving him what he called his 'freedom'.

However, if it was easy to dismiss the new facts as far as they concerned Gerald, she found it a good deal more difficult to decide why Drury should have acquainted her with them. It could not be because he was concerned that 'that silly fellow', as he called Gerald, should be deceived; nor did she believe that he was here bothering with the claims of abstract justice, since he would believe that Gerald deserved to be deceived. The feeling between the two men, on the few occasions when she had seen them together in the early days of her marriage at Linda's parties, had been obvious enough; nor was it improved, on Gerald's side, by Linda's bland remark that "Jessica's marriage had made a confirmed bachelor of Drury—a mistake, because most women preferred their doctors to be married." It was a remark, she was aware, that Gerald, faithless but jealous, had never forgotten. Moreover, since that evening back in the spring when Drury had looked in upon her as he drove home from his errand in Richmond, she had realised that there had been truth in Linda's ill-timed remark. For despite the fact that their conversation had moved so easily about trivialities—the tricks of two amusing animals, the un wisdom of unbolted garden gates and open doors and uncurtained windows of fully-lighted rooms, with nothing more serious than his disapproval of what he considered the too onerous conditions under which she pursued her job—she had realised that what Linda had so mischievously asserted might indeed be true. The years had made no difference to the feeling Drury had for her, which as a young girl she had found embarrassing, and found so no longer. When she caught herself pondering this matter, she realised that the letter he had

written to her at the time of Andy's death had knocked down the first of the barriers between them; but when Gerald had written to the farm asking her to marry him, the others stood as firmly as ever. I was a long time growing up, she thought now. Perhaps to do that thoroughly I had to marry Gerald. . . .

Then why? she asked herself now. Why did Drury think it necessary to give her a version of Gerald's situation of which, left to herself, she would never have heard? Most men in his circumstances would have kept quiet about a story they had so oddly stumbled upon instead of reporting it to her and so giving her the chance to think again about her decision to grant Gerald his divorce.

Did he, perhaps, believe that she did not want it, that her well-known attitude to marriage and to divorce, as practised in the year of grace nineteen-twenty-five, had been too roughly and unfairly assailed—and defeated—by a husband determined to get his way? The images these alternatives conjured up, however, were such obvious Aunt Sallies, bearing no likeness whatsoever to the young person she knew herself to be, with a mind of her own and the ability to maintain herself at least in decent comfort, that she simply could not imagine Drury accepting them as real for one moment. It was true that her marriage with Gerald had collapsed long ago, that his mental cruelty and vanity had brought it down like a pack of cards about their heads; but that of itself had not been sufficient to move her to make an end of it, though her pride had almost brought her to it. At that time divorce or separation were the least of Gerald's desires; and the wish for either must for Jessica be mutual; it was, indeed, the one reason for which divorce, so she believed, should be granted, and in law it was the one sure and certain reason for which it would be refused. So she must go into court as an ill-used wife, pleading desertion and misconduct on the part of her husband, which would annoy her extremely. But it was what she meant to do, nonetheless. Her only consolation was that she would be able to recoup part at least of her self-respect by announcing her refusal of alimony.●●

It was at this point in her self-communings that she decided there was no point whatever in sitting there chasing the pros and cons of her situation round and round as if she were a squirrel in a cage. The evening was calm and peaceful: a gentle breeze had sprung up—a moving coolness—upon which all these unhappy thoughts seemed suddenly to be borne away, and she found herself recalling earlier stations of her life and Drury Hamilton's presence at them. Herself as a very small girl on her way to school and Drury, the tall schoolboy, charging down to her rescue from young toughs with a football. Drury bathing the wound in her throat and not hurting her at all. Later, striding after her as she left the station or library and relieving her of her everlasting armful of books. Drury dancing with her at Linda's coming-of-age party, when they had first got to know each other, had agreed that champagne was an over-rated drink and she had found he liked Gerald Harwood no more than she did; Drury striding across the Common with her on the eve of his departure for France, nimbly circumventing—and without any sign of the embarrassment which assailed her—the couples who lay about on the grass, oblivious of a world poised over the abyss, and talking, talking all the time. Not so much of the war and the silly things clever men were finding to write about it, as of War, the world's ulcer, of Patriotism, and of something Drury called the villain of the piece—the Sovereign State.

How long ago it all seemed!—and yet this evening, as she sat there in the darkening world, it was as if, despite all that had happened to her in which he had had no part, all her life had been set and held within the frame which Drury Hamilton, all those years ago, had made for it.

She was glad when he returned, seated himself at her side, inquired if she felt cold and, getting a satisfactory answer, drove slowly on, to turn at the foot of the hill into Paradise Road, where he drew up.

"Have you made up your mind?" he then asked.

"If that means have I altered it, the answer is 'No'."

"You mean not to take up these—rumours, shall we call them?—with Gerald, but to let the divorce proceed?"

It was clear she meant that; clear also that this was what he had expected. But she knew that he had to hear her put it into words.

"Years ago I felt I had much better reasons for divorce than this escapade with another woman now affords me, but the law of the land wouldn't have agreed with me. And I got over it, though the best part of my feeling for Gerald was killed stone-dead by it. And now I can't see that it matters whether this child is his or not—though I should say not; but he has admitted the association and taken on responsibility for its existence, and there seems no more to say."

After a pause, Drury said, "Sometimes, you know, these fresh unions don't work out as they're expected to do, and if trouble does occur the child often becomes a bone of contention. Women who have used this road to marriage are not always above informing the husband that the child is in fact not his. Supposing the young man said to have taken himself off to South America comes back?"

"These are Gerald's risks, not ours. In any case, as to the child we could only raise doubts, we could prove nothing. I don't fancy myself in the role of Providence—much better to leave things as they are, in the lap of the gods. Besides, now that Gerald has got over the hurdle—his interview with me—and recovered from it, I fancy he's happier than he has ever been since he grew up. He's a terrible snob, and the idea of having titled in-laws must be thrilling him to the soul, especially after my humble family. But the important factor is the child, which he certainly appeared to believe will be his own. Perhaps because he so much wants to believe it—the alternative would be unbearable. Not having a child, you know, gave him a bad inferiority complex."

"I do know. I'm also acquainted with the way in which he worked it off—in the fashion, I may say, of too many of my sex. 'Unfortunately, my wife . . .' No, of course he didn't put it into words—he didn't need to. Gerald is a master of implication, as I'm sure you must know."

"Oh, yes, indeed, and in this connection how bitterly I resented it, even though for years now I should have hated to disprove his insinuation."

"Is it because of the child you are letting the divorce go through?"

"No, but I'm sure it's Gerald's reason for asking for it. Nothing else, I'm certain, would have brought him to it. After all, why should he bother? We lived—reasonably—together. He had all the freedom he wanted and no questions asked by a wife willing—and preferring—to remain in the social background, and so not cramping his style, who didn't cost him a penny and added considerably to the yearly income. I never could see Gerald rushing off into the Divorce Court, you know, for *any* woman, and so probably dropping the reality for the shadow. Too risky altogether. The only danger Gerald faced was to come across a woman cleverer and even more unscrupulous than himself. He's lucky, though, to have found one who has private means."

"That's quite the bitterest thing I've ever heard you say."

"I don't feel in the least bitter, only extremely realistic. Why did you tell me this story, Drury?"

"Because I thought you ought to know it. I couldn't be sure what you might do if you felt that Gerald was being deceived."

"He deserves to be deceived, I think, by some woman, and doubtless wouldn't have escaped it for ever, but that is his own affair."

"So long as you don't feel it is yours as well—I couldn't be sure of that. I had to tell you what I'd heard, even though I felt I took a considerable risk."

To this she said nothing, but when he laid his hand over hers she let it lie there, and presently Bess put out a warm, approving tongue. Bess, so watchful, so quick to forestall a liberty where her mistress was concerned, had, it was clear, accepted Drury.

"Oh, Jess," he said, "what a lot of time we've wasted!"

"But there's still a good deal of it left—if we're lucky."

"We *shall* be lucky!" he told her, and as if there was nothing else they need say to each other that evening, he took back his hand and drove on in silence. Pulling up a few minutes later beneath the old high wall behind which, in some warmer, more

leisurely age, oranges and peaches had been grown, he shut off the engine of the car and put his hand again over Jessica's. The little road in which she lived still sported one or two lighted upstairs windows; for the rest, this particular corner of the district showed no sign of life.

"I don't like the idea of your being here alone," Drury told her, "because until the divorce goes through I shan't be able to keep an eye on you. You must come to us instead—and often. But I wish you'd go home—quite apart from all else, you'd be much nearer."

"Yes, but I'd rather not. It'll be no worse being here than it's ever been. I've spent the greater part of my married life alone. I've learnt to like my own company and that of Bess and Dinky. During the war I hadn't either, and no telephone. You don't have to worry about me—my parents are doing too much of that, I'm quite sure. If you could find time, would you look in occasionally and reassure them?"

"You've quite made up your mind not to go back?"

"It would never do. I should just live in an atmosphere I couldn't endure—my parents feel very upset about my marriage, you know, and take too much blame to themselves. I should never get my work done in that atmosphere. I can't bear people to be sorry for me, especially when there's absolutely no need."

"I won't argue. I'm sure you know best on such a matter. Anyway, I'll look in at Number Six for you. And now you must go. I'll wait here until I see your upstairs lights go on. Are you quite sure you aren't nervous?"

"Not in the least. Good night—and thank you."

"For what, in heaven's name?"

"For everything. Particularly for being around."

"I've always been around, you know—except during the war—and look what mischief you got into then, marrying that silly, conceited fellow!"

"You made yourself very . . . unobtrusive."

"I thought you wanted it that way."

"I don't think I knew what I wanted, save not to marry Gerald."

"But you did!"

"Because I was feeling very small—very *reduced*—and Gerald was made to look correspondingly big and strong. A man of iron my parents thought him, but in my heart I knew he was only a lath painted to look like iron."

Did it help her, Drury wondered, to have been proved so devastatingly right in the reading of character, or did she remember only her folly in mistrusting her own judgment? Linda had maintained that women found Gerald Harwood attractive, but so far as Jessica was concerned, he would have been prepared, that night of Linda's 'twenty-first', to swear to the contrary. What, he wondered, had made her feel 'very small and reduced', and why should that have urged her to marriage with that silly fellow? Some day she would tell him; there was going to be plenty of time to learn what had caused her to waste nearly nine years of her youth on so paltry a creature.

But what she said now was, "I ought to go . . ." and he knew that she should, for the night hath a thousand eyes; but for a moment he laid his hand over hers and whispered the one word, "Darling." The ancient word, so cheapened by a post-war generation, took on again its own loveliness and meaning as Drury used it. *Darling, little dear, loved, best-loved, lovable.* . . . She sat entranced until he moved away his hand and opened the door. For a moment she stood there in the empty little road, disentangling Bess from her lead, then she straightened up, flashed a smile at him which seemed to divide the dusk, and was gone.

Within a few minutes the lights shone out from the house. Drury waited until she drew the curtains across her bedroom window, then, holding to the open door, and not engaging his gears, he let the car slip silently away.

